

TOO MANY JURISTS AND NOT ENOUGH POETS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 124; Mark 9:38-50

I have a number of favorite lines from the movies, some famous, some not so famous. I love that scene at the end of *Casablanca* at the airport when Capt. Renault, the chief of police, tells the arriving officers to “round up the usual suspects,” even though he has just watched Humphrey Bogart shoot Major Strasser the Nazi officer who has tried to prevent Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) and Victor Laszlo (Paul Henried) from escaping

I love Bette Davis descending the stairs as Margo Channing in “All About Eve”, and with cigarette in hand says, “Fasten your seat belts, it’s going to be a bumpy night.”

But one of my most favorite lines in the movies is one you may not recognize. It falls from the lips of Jodie Foster playing an astronaut, Ellie Arroway, in the movie *Contact*. Foster rides a space machine the dimensions and specifications of which have been revealed to scientists through a code beamed from the far recesses of space. The space vehicle takes her on a fantastic journey in which the glories of another dimension fly past the transparent interior of the conveyance.

What she sees defies description. It is a magnificent shower of colors and images exploding past her and she is overwhelmed by its magnitude. She, the exquisitely trained scientist, finally admits that her aerospace and geophysical vocabulary fail her. “No words,” she confesses, “You should have sent a poet. You should have sent a poet.”

She speaks the truth that all of us know, that sometimes the most significant realities that we experience in life are ones for which we cannot find adequate expression except to liken it to what we can explain, to tell a story, or use a metaphor. We point but cannot describe, we look but are dumbfounded for words. It is like trying to explain music to someone who is deaf, or the tang of a lemon to someone who cannot taste. It is the work of the poet, and sometimes the theologian.

Religion is nothing if not an attempt to express in words and images a truth that is at the heart of all truth, confirmed in faith not in the mind, because it bears a truth that is greater than we can explain, and larger than we can express.

The work of the poet is to describe the deepest of feelings, the holiest of truths, as e.e. cummings once said, “the bud of the bud and the root of the root, and the sky of the sky of a tree called life.”¹

Fred Craddock of Emory University says there are some passages of scripture so great, so powerful that all the preacher can do is take the hand of the parishioner and stand in the shadow of its enormity, as if one were standing before a great high mountain, or curling one’s toes over the edge of an expansive abyss; and there, be awestruck.

Much of what we do theologically is the craft of poetry, borrowing the words of the world we know to describe the dimensions of the one we do not, the one that we have only seen from afar, reflected, and that in a mirror dimly. It is, at times, much to be preferred over the language of prose and law and fact.

The Presbyterian Church, as a tradition has always valued intellect, the life of the mind. Calvin, a lawyer himself, was given to words and concrete expressions of complex realities. It is no wonder that the church continues to love the concrete, the verbal, the logical when it comes to faith.

A few Presbyterian churches and presbyteries today, in the wake of the most recent General Assembly, have instituted a new rigor for ordination exams, closely scrutinizing the theology and Biblical knowledge and confessional orthodoxy of those candidates that they suspect may not be acceptable to them. Unwilling to talk about sexuality, they choose, instead, to bore down on the classical disciplines. It is a way of killing two birds with one stone.

Recently, I am told, a nineteen year old elder barely out of high school, having been prompted by someone else, grilled a pastor transferring into his presbytery, asking whether the pastor could explain the doctrine of substitutionary atonement and whether he embraces it. It was a question that the fledgling elder clearly could not have answered himself, and likely one for which he could not have appreciated a nuanced answer.

Don't get me wrong. We all want well trained, thoughtful, reflective and cogent thinkers as pastors. That's not the issue.

What I am concerned about is the tendency to drift toward litmus testing in the church, listening for specific language, evangelical phraseology, a fundamental slant, a biblical literalism, a theology of the atoning death of Christ that trades the realization that all religious language is inexact for the expectation that there is an approved and singular answer for every theological question.

Never mind that you do not understand the atonement issue, the point is that all religious language fails. All of our attempts to express in earthly language the inexpressible magnitude of heaven's mysteries are always doomed to some level of failure.

It was Plato who described the incapacity of a being of lesser reality to capture the essential nature of a being of greater reality. In other words, the ant cannot fully understand human beings, any more than human beings can fully understand God. All we see are shadows reflected on a wall and what we try to do is describe their source.

How can we expect of one another in the church exact, uniform, and unbending theological language when speaking of the complex realities of God? We are all, to some extent feeling our way in the dark. Why, the very name of God is a riddle. The name God gives Moses that day he was tending Jethro's sheep on Mt. Horeb and Moses asked God's name was, *I am who I am*. God said, that's my name. A Hebrew word that defies definition. *I am who I am. I am becoming whom I will become. I will be whom I will be*. It is a word too dynamic to have just one interpretation. Like God, it cannot be pinned down.

Our God is a God who is reluctant to have anyone see his face for fear that too much will be revealed. God appears in the Old Testament as a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, a God who comes to Abraham as three mysterious strangers in the desert's steamy heat, and approaches Moses in a bush which the fire does not consume.

He comes as one who is fully human and fully divine, as Jesus, the best and bravest of us all. Jesus, who speaks in parables and tells stories to get across his most important points. Jesus, whose teaching is anything but literal or reductionist, whose expressive images of God and God's commonwealth are expansive, poetic, metaphorical. *The kingdom of heaven, he said, is like treasure hidden in a field, like a merchant in search of fine pearls, like a net thrown into the sea.* Jesus is himself poet and metaphor, and his life a poem, saying what it will, like a diamond showing its facets when held to the light. Do we really think that in the passage today he literally means that we should cut off a hand or pluck out an eye if it offends? He speaks in metaphors and teaches in parables.

Unsure what to make of Jesus, his judges and interrogators tried to pin him down to chargeable offenses. "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asked him. "You say so," Jesus said,² an answer without an answer.

"What is truth," Pilate asked Jesus, to which Jesus made no response, knowing that Pilate would not know the truth if the truth stood before him, which it did, and so illustrating the answer to the question he posed.

In our search for ecclesiastical clarity in the church, we substitute our theological enigmas and spiritual yearnings with golden calves of orthodox exactitude that express inexactly what we know in our heart of hearts cannot be expressed, the being and substance of God.

When children ask us difficult questions like "Where does God live?" or "Did it really take God only seven days to create the universe?" or "What happens to us when we die?" We know that the answers we give them are little more than an arrow shot into the air. We have no idea where the arrow lands, or if it arrives anywhere near the mark. All our proximate answers this side of heaven are inexact expressions of an infinite reality that is deeper than we understand.

This is not to say that *any* answer is as good as another. We do, after all have scripture, and creeds, and an accumulation of knowledge of the best of theological minds interpreting both Jewish and Christian scriptures. We have the teaching of the church, and so the accumulation of experience and tradition. We are not without blazing trails on the trees of the theological trail that guides our journey. We can see the beaten path, and some of the side excursions of faith and imagination that have led to unproductive ends.

So it's not that there are no directions for us to follow, no creeds to be known, no experience of others to guide our thinking. There is ample guidance to lead us to heaven's gate, to follow Jesus, to shine light on our path, and to guide us in our spiritual growth and discipleship. But there is not but one way to tell the story of God's truth, or to point to the mystery of God's ineffable being. So beware anyone who would reduce the faith to a few essential tenets that must be articulated in a specific way and embraced in only one vocabulary and no other.

Sometimes I think we make religion too complicated. We mess it up with our orthodoxy and homogeneity and singularity. Unity is much to be desired in the church, but marching in lock step uniformity is quite another. One of the points of the Protestant Reformation, after all, was to be able to express faith in divergence.

Arguably the greatest evangelical theological mind of the twenty century was Karl Barth, whose masterful *Church Dogmatics* is one of the most important theological contributions of this past century. He was once asked by a questioner if he could somehow distill the essential message of the Christian Bible into one primary idea. Dr. Barth, thought for a moment and said, “Yes. Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.”

There isn't any self-reflective, honest theologian, teacher, pastor, or biblical scholar, who is not eventually reduced to the frank confession that even the most spiritually disciplined human mind is not fully capable of understanding or expressing exactly what the essential nature and being of God is, nor precisely what makes God tick, or why God does one thing as opposed to another.

We are all reduced eventually to the admission that when it comes to God, some things we do not and will not ever know this side of heaven. And all our theological doctrines and confessions and creeds and encyclicals and edicts and dogmatics are but a pale and inexact reflection of the greatest and most eloquent truths that defy description.

It is only in the inexactness of poetry, the expression of comparison and metaphor expressed in reference to the *seen*, that the *unseen* becomes visible. There something of the feeling and imagery and power of the holy that we strive to describe emerges.

Barbara Brown Taylor has written about the way in which the church sometimes hinders our ability to grow spiritually when it tries to pour us into the mold of its creeds and doctrines. Writing of her experience as a parish priest, she says, In my ministry...

I... spent hours talking with people who had trouble believing. For some, the issue was that they believed *less* than they thought they should about Jesus. They were not troubled by the idea that he may have had two human parents instead of one or that his real presence after his death might have been more metaphysical than physical. The glory they beheld in him had more to do with the nature of his being than with the number of his miracles, but they had suffered enough at the hands of true believers to learn to keep their mouths shut.

For others, [she goes on] the issue was that they believed *more* than Jesus. Having beheld his glory all over the place, including places where Christian doctrine said that it should not be. I knew Christians who had beheld God's glory in a Lakota sweat lodge, in a sacred Celtic grove, and at the edge of a Hawaiian volcano, as well as in dreams and visions that they were afraid to tell anyone else about at all. These people not only feared being shunned for their unorthodox narratives, they also feared sharing some of the most powerful things that had ever happened to them with people who might dismiss them.

...If it is true that God exceeds all our efforts to contain God, then is it too big a stretch to declare that dumbfoundedness is what all Christians have most in common? Or that coming together to confess all that we do not know is at least as sacred an activity as declaring what we think we do know?

[Finally, Taylor writes] I had become an Episcopalian in the first place because the Anglican way cared more for common prayer than for right belief, but under stress Episcopalians began vetting one another on the virgin birth, the divinity of Jesus, and his physical resurrection from the dead. Both in [my own parish] and elsewhere, the poets began drifting away from churches as the jurists grew louder and more insistent.³

Maybe these days there are too many jurists in the church and not enough poets. Maybe we need to recover that sense of awe and wonder and dumbfoundedness that has slipped away from us in our urgency to understand our faith, when all we can ever really do is marvel at it and at God.

Nowhere is that more obvious than at this table where God's people are fed with spiritual food, a poem in itself, a metaphor, a symbol that here and in our lives we are always doing more than we understand and saying more than we know. Especially when with bread and wine in hand we serve one another saying something that is both utterly impossible from a logical perspective and yet in the language of poetry and faith is utterly true, "Here," we say, "is the body of Christ, broken for you. The blood of Christ, shed for you."

So let me extend to all the poets in the place a welcome invitation to receive and to celebrate a mystery that is greater than we comprehend and more expansive than we know... the truth that God is here, and there, and with us, and beyond us. And if that seems more than reason dictates, so be it. It is a truth that only poetry can describe and only faith can embrace.

For the invitation to the table says not "come and comprehend," nor "approach and be enlightened," nor even "sit and be convinced." But rather poetically, "taste and see" that the Lord is good. Blessed are those who put their trust in God.

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¹ e.e. cummings, i carry your heart with me

² Mark 15:2

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, **Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith**. (New York: HarperCollins, 2006) 110-111.