

31 January, 2010; Epiphany 4C  
Jer 1:4-10; Ps 71:1-6  
I Cor 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

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WHERE do babies come from? It's one of the questions most dreaded by parents, not because there are no answers, but because our answers seem utterly inadequate to the reality of a new and living being. Jennifer Michael Hecht writes, "The birth of a child can bring extraordinarily religious feelings -- because it is a good thing, but also because it makes no real sense. Where did this miniature human being come from? Technically, we made it out of nine months' worth of French toast, salad, and lamb chops. Technically, our bodies hold tiny instructions for how to build human eyes, a language center in a human brain, and a human spirit -- fussy, joyful, or otherwise. But how strange that such a thing as *fussy* exists and is created thusly."<sup>1</sup>

Hecht is speaking of the genesis of *wonder*, the creature which perches in our heart and forces us to admit that there are truths which exceed our understanding, realities larger than we can grasp. We can speak fluently of DNA, cell division, and amniotic fluid, but these, while true, just don't explain how a newborn baby can bend and stretch her fingers, or the way her lashes touch her cheek while she lies sleeping. Such truths can be expressed, not in the language of science or of business, but only in poetry, art, music, gesture -- languages which exceed their actual meaning to brim over with the unspoken. Perhaps that is why our church baptizes infants: the combination of word and gesture is a way of honoring the way they exceed our explanations. It recognizes our sense that they are gift.

Marianne Sawicki describes the church as a community of "memory, desire, and practice" aimed at developing competence in seeing the risen Lord. Our Scriptures, she reminds us, "were never written to stand alone...but rather to precipitate recognition of something outside themselves."<sup>2</sup> They point, not to their own stories, but to Jesus, crucified and risen in the past, moving among us today. Like John the Baptist as he is painted, they gesture always beyond themselves, to Christ.

The church is called to be that kind of community: one which reveals the living presence of God. In our world today, there are few more necessary cornerstones to such practice than the recovery of wonder, for its loss is the root of much that troubles our world. Contrast these two passages. First, God's words to Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." (Jer 1:5) The second, Sawicki's comment on our time: "The onslaught against the human body in our century has been massive and sustained. Racism, genocide, and ethnic cleansing; famine, joblessness, and substance abuse; rape, heterosexism, and sexual exploitation: these are not individual aberrations but policies systemically engineered and implemented in the pursuit of political advantage."<sup>3</sup> Clearly, these two realities do not belong to the same way of understanding the world. In the first, human life is sacred, a matter of divine gift, a source of astonishment and awe. In the second, much of our world, wonder has vanished, and that departure has opened the door for human life to be held in contempt, broken, and used as a weapon or an object of trade. There does not seem to be much middle ground.

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you," says the Lord. These words are spoken, not just to Jeremiah, but to each person who lives and breathes in the world. God knew us in his mind before he gave us flesh. Before we drew breath or opened our eyes upon our first dawn, already we

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, p.xv.

<sup>2</sup> Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices*, pp.2, 6.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, vii. Obviously, in certain instances, these *are* "individual aberrations," but the conduct of peoples in places as diverse as Bosnia, the Congo, and the Sudan, reveals that, sometimes, these are matters of deliberate policy.

were shaped by the hands of love. "Not in utter nakedness, /But trailing clouds of glory do we come /From God, who is our home."<sup>4</sup> And yet, so much that is around us conspires to make us forget that truth. Advertisers segment us ruthlessly, assuming that our age and place in the world say more about our humanity and our desires than the individuality given us by God. Jingoism harnesses our love of our country to the denigration of other people. The forces of commerce suggest that it is normal(!) to put a price on a human life; only yesterday, we suspended the medical transport of critically injured Haitians to the United States until we can figure out who has to pay for the medical care. It makes perfect sense, if you are the hospital administrator or the governor or the president, trying to control costs. It makes perfect sense, until you are the person who is dying, or his mother. Then you must cry out, "Aren't I a human being?"

The great rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "Awe is an intuition for the dignity of all things, a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something supreme." As such, it is also the root of love, which St. Paul places at the center of our common life. The life of the Christian congregation must be a school for love, a laboratory in which we play at love and grace until they become second nature to us. It is a place of resistance to the denigration of others. This is dangerous work. It asks us to play on the edge of a precipice, the one called "the way it's always been done." When Martin marched, when Rosa sat, they were confronting their audience with their own humanity, and asking others to wonder at it long enough to learn to see, but they knew people might choose the familiar path of violence instead.

Jesus precipitated such a moment when he tried to preach in his hometown. He goes to the synagogue and picks up the scroll of Isaiah and reads the good news of God's salvation; then he announces, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21) And everyone spoke well of him. They claimed him as one of their own. "Is not this Joseph's son?" (Luke 4: 22) But Jesus refuses to allow them to remain in their parochial vision. He is not just a hometown boy made good. He is light for the world, unity for all the scattered people of God. And so he baits them, dares them to reject him: "You will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'...Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." (Luke 4:23-24) Against the logic of town and clan, Christ juxtaposes the demand of compassion for the stranger: Elijah's feeding of a widow in Zarephath (a town in Sidon) and Elisha's healing of Naaman, a Syrian. He refuses to let the people of his hometown believe that they are more to God than other people. Against the neat categories of Torah (clean and unclean, gentile and Jew, permitted and forbidden), he juxtaposes the evidence of God's concern for those in the "wrong" box. He challenges them to recover their wonder at all the workings of God.

So much of Christ's teaching is about caring for the wrong kind of body. The Good Samaritan, the woman by the well, the healing of the Centurion's daughter, even the forgiving of the woman taken in adultery and the other woman, the one who bathes his feet in her tears, who was believed to be a harlot -- each of these stories is about the tending and nurturing of the bodies of people of the wrong race, the wrong class, the wrong religion, the wrong side of the saint and sinner divide. When former Bishop of New York Paul Moore came to speak to us in seminary, he spoke of his time in the civil rights movement: how people would touch each other, and how that touch, which honored one another's humanity, undid the beatings, the verbal assaults, the spitting. It was the kind of touch Jesus received when, two nights before his death, a woman came to him and anointed his feet with oil and dried them with her hair. She honored him in the flesh, as antidote against the ultimate dishonoring of the body he took on for us.

Feeding, healing, the sacraments of bread, wine, water, and oil, all these are times when we ask God to touch our flesh, when we move from words which can wound to gestures which can

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<sup>4</sup> William Wordsworth, "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood."

only make well. We who preach the Resurrection of Christ must live in ways that make such a claim intelligible, and that has implications for how we treat one another. If we rise again as embodied people, then we must honor one another's bodies now, in this life. When we shelter the homeless or feed the poor, what are we doing but tending the "wrong" kind of bodies, the bodies which make people uncomfortable. We are bearing witness against the parochialism of the world that there is a God who transcends all our boundaries.

When *Times* published the story about the Haitian airlifts yesterday, the first comment on the website read as follows: "Another wave of third world, uneducated people of an alien culture is about to hit our shores, helped this time by the Obama administration's desire to show compassion. Unfortunately, the tax-paying citizens of this country will have to pay, in more ways than one."<sup>5</sup> That same week, ten volunteers gathered in the basement of our church to start a new ESL program. Both were responding to the same situation: the presence of people in our communities who come from other cultures and speak other languages. The first was a response of pure fear; the second, a response of love. One response would leave wounded people to die by the side of the road; the other, our response, shares with them the skills they will need to thrive.

When St. Paul wrote his hymn to love (the one we can all recite by our mid-twenties because we have heard it at so many weddings), he was speaking of *that* kind of love: the love with which we build up one another. That is the witness which Christ Church bears into the world: that we are a people called and united by the love of Christ, washed in pure water, nourished by his body and blood, who come together each week to learn to care for one another, to practice tending one another, so that, when we leave these doors, we may demonstrate by how we live that "there is a still more excellent way." (I Cor 12: 31) When we teach one another, when we bring food to the sick or sacraments to the homebound, we learn to resist the claims of indifference by practicing the ways of love. We ask God to open our eyes, so that we can see one another as God does, through the lens of God's perfect love. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? With God's help, we will.

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<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*, online version, posted by Chris of La Jolla, California, on January 30, 2010.