

9 August, 2009: Proper 14B
2 Sam 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Ps 130
Eph 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

Rev. Deborah Meister

In Plato's Republic, there was no place for the arts. When I first learned this, his fictional, idealized city moved to the bottom of my must-visit list. After all, I'm the kind of person who spends my vacations reading books or in museums; I simply cannot imagine how impoverished my life would be without art and music and literature. And yet, Plato was no fool. There is much to be learned from such a great thinker, even if we do not agree with his conclusions.

When Plato reviewed the nature and effects of painting, sculpture, and verse, he discerned two key things about them. First, they are illusions, intended to convince people that what is illusory is real. In fact, they are doubly misleading: they try to copy the appearance of a thing, and appearances are, themselves, a form of deception. We experience this each time we bite into what appears to be a perfectly ripened peach, only to find that it is mealy and dry on our tongue. The reality of a person or thing cannot always be grasped by looking at it; even in the world of human beings, "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain" (Hamlet, I.v.) Plato asks, then, "To which is painting directed in every case, to the imitation of reality as it is or appearance as it appears? Is it an imitation of a phantasm or of the truth?" If a painting is an imitation of visual reality, and if what is seen is only the smallest part of the truth, then "the mimetic art," he writes, "produces a product that is far removed from the truth in the accomplishment of its task." (Plato, *Republic*, Book X, 598, trans. Paul Shorey.)

But on top of this, Plato realizes that people rarely create art without an agenda. Art has a purpose: to move the human spirit. It might be a kind of joke, like the blown-glass candies my uncle keeps in a dish on his coffee table, or it might move the audience to rage, to sorrow, to delight, or to awe. This is one of the reasons we seek art out: it teaches us to see and to care in new ways. But Plato points out that, in submitting ourselves to these influences, we are subjecting ourselves to the domination of passion. "If you grant admission to the honeyed Muse in lyric or epic," he warns, "pleasure and pain will be lords of your city instead of law and that which shall from time to time have approved itself to the general reason as the best." (*Ibid*, X, 607.) In other words, Plato teaches that our civic life is meant to be governed according to rational precepts, but the creative arts tempt us to short-circuit the hard work of reasoned argument and follow the course that "feels good" or "seems right." They invite us to a kind of intellectual sloth, in which we do not do the work which leads us to discern what is good and what is best.

Plato's language is dated, but his insight is prescient. Never could he have imagined a culture so shaped by pervasive dishonesty as the one in which we live. Each day, we are subjected to hundreds of images and advertisements determined to move us, to persuade us, to convince us to take a certain action or to buy a certain product or support a certain candidate. And we know, don't we, that these ads make claims which simply aren't true. I remember, when I lived in Los Angeles, drawing up short at the sight of a large billboard which read, "The Marlboro Man has cancer." There, in muted golds and violets and dusty greens, was the archetypal cowboy, the one who was supposed to convince me and you and all the other passers-by that smoking was manly, all-American, the natural accompaniment to an active, outdoor lifestyle. There, underneath, was the truth from which the image was usually intended to distract us.

Today, of course, we live with the added confusion of not knowing whether the image we are looking at ever existed at all. Real images are photoshopped; false images are created using all kinds of special effects; and the domain of such altered imagery has spread from advertising and film to the front pages of our news sources. Almost every week, it seems, we find ourselves embroiled in a debate that is really an attempt to sift truth from lies: Is a popular biography really a work of

fiction? Where is the governor of South Carolina? Will we be allowed to see pictures of the caskets of dead soldiers, or will our media perpetuate the illusion that no-one is dying? Do the people shouting down our legislators at town-hall meetings on health-care reform represent a vast and angry constituency, or are they members of a small fringe group strategically deployed to intimidate our leaders? And how do we find out? These are arguments over the images that will shape our souls, not by reason, but by passion -- and they threaten to eliminate from our public domain even the possibility of honest and frank conversation, the kind that leads to consensus and good decisions. My sister's boyfriend gets his news from Fox, while I listen to NPR; we can't discuss issues together because we don't even have basic facts in common! In such a culture, Pilate's question gains sudden cogency: "What is truth?" (John 18:38)

It is no accident that the portion of the dialogue in which Plato begins by discussing truth and illusion goes on to discuss the immortality of the soul. Being able to sift through our experience, to determine what is right and good, is essential to determining the course of our life. When St. Paul writes, "putting away all falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another" (Eph 4:25), he is urging us to create the kind of society in which our daily interactions are coherent and have the possibility of training us in truth. "Falsehood... bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, malice" (Eph 4:31) -- all of these fragment our souls, expose us to a world in which we are continually second-guessing ourselves and our neighbors. In a world of rumor, innuendo, and backstabbing, it becomes safer -- far safer! -- to stick with the two or three people you already know than to take the risk of trust. And yet, by such a retreat, we surrender the possibility of community and friendship. We lose the ability to trust.

More than that, we lose the ability to make sense of our experiences in ways that allow us to grow. When someone comes to me because she has learned that a friend has been lying to her, or that his spouse has been having an affair, that realization causes them to question, not only the immediate context, but all their past relations. Was it ever real?, they ask. Was I ever really the beautiful person I saw in my husband's eyes? Was my wife telling the truth when she persuaded me to distance myself from my college room-mate, or was that part of concealing the truth? Take away the trust, and all our relationships shift and turn, and even what we thought we had learned of ourselves becomes questionable.

It *matters* whether evolution was the mechanism of the creation of a multiplicity of life-forms, whether global warming is occurring, whether people of all races and nations are children of one God, for these claims lead us to shape our lives in certain ways. If it is true that my car is emitting carbon which is changing the global climate, then I should choose to live within walking distance of many of my daily necessities. If it is true that I am equal in the eyes of God to a child in Haiti, then I should do what I can to ensure that the children of Haiti have food and medicine and access to education. The things we accept as true determine who we are.

St. Paul urges us to create a counter-culture of authenticity, a world as real as bread or wood. Speak the truth. If you are angry, do not let it fester. Do not steal, but engage in honest labor. "Let no evil come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up..., so that your words may give grace to those who hear." (Eph 4:29) He wants Christian communities to be places which re-orient us from the confusion and deception of the world, places in which the ground is solid beneath our feet and our words are simple and direct. Like the parent of a young child, we are to encourage one another, saying to one another only what is wholesome and will promote growth. "If your little boy asks for a serving of fish," asks Christ, "do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? If your little girl asks for an egg, do you trick her with a spider? As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing—you're at least decent to your own children. And don't you think the Father who conceived you in love will give the Holy Spirit when you ask him?" (Luke 11:11-13, *The*

*Message*¹) Christians aim at creating a coherent world for one another and for all those we encounter, because only such a world can reveal the consistent, firm, and gentle love of our God.

This trustworthiness is even more necessary because, frankly, some of what our faith claims as truth makes so little sense in everyday terms. When Jesus stands before a crowd and says, *I am bread; eat me. I am wine; drink me*, the crowds are right to be disturbed. They respond with hostility and confusion, "Isn't this the son of Joseph? Don't we know his father? Don't we know his mother? How can he now say, 'I came down out of heaven' and expect anyone to believe him?" (John 6:42, *The Message*) They are applying the standards of everyday logic, and, by those standards, Jesus is speaking like a madman.

But, of course, there is more than one kind of truth. Jesus is pointing them and us to a level of truth that lies underneath ordinary experience, the divine reality which belies mere appearances. The starving, muddy child with the swollen belly and the glassy eyes does not look like our children, and yet, she is our sister. The drunk sleeping on the doorstep, the other man clothed in the elegantly-cut garments of the powerful: these are, somehow, children of the same Father. The bread is somehow flesh, the wine, somehow, blood. The woman gasping out her last breath is being met, even now, by a loving God, and she will live forever. None of these is evident to our senses, and yet, they are true. We must begin, somewhere, to believe, and there is no other place to learn than from one another.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen; not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." It is necessary, I think, to be able to say the same of Christians: I believe in them because by them I see everything else. I believe in them because, when I look at them, I see integrity and gentleness and kindness and searing honesty and a fierce and challenging love. I believe in them because they are teaching me that cynicism is not the only access to truth. I believe in them because, everyday, they are giving their heart for the life of the world. I believe in them because, when I am among them, I can feel the broken world being knitted together again. And I believe in their God, because, when I am among them, it makes sense to say, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever." (John 6:51)

¹ *The Message* is a contemporary translation of the Bible by Eugene Peterson. Unlike most translations, it does not attempt to translate word-for-word, but rather, to convey the sense of the original in words we will understand today. It is thus less accurate than one would want for serious Bible study, but often more vivid for devotional reading.