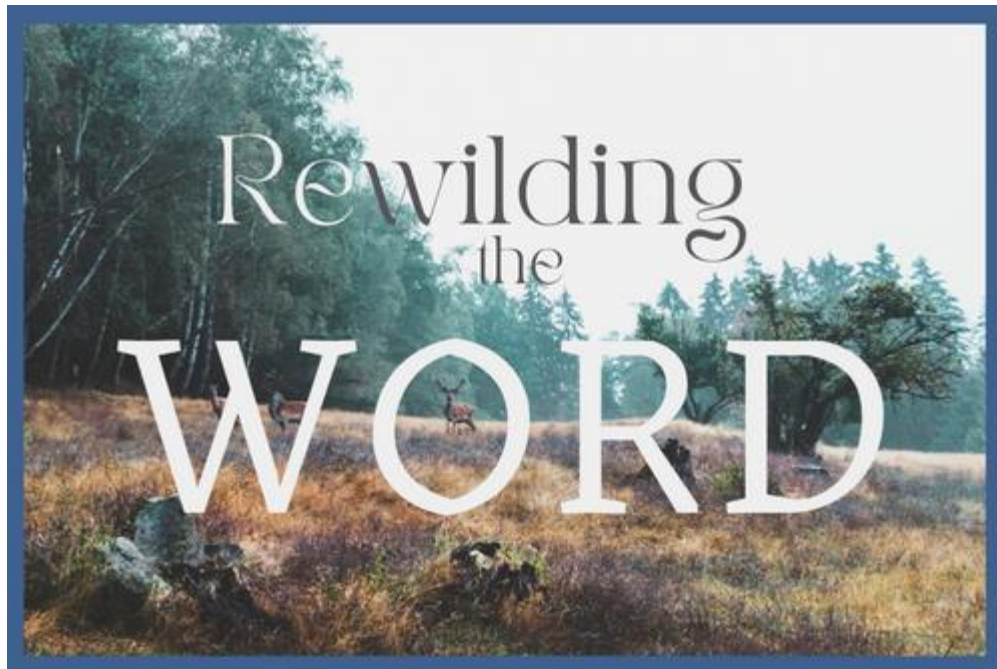

GANZ - #12 - REWILDING THE WORD (OCTOBER 2024)



A Story

Yesterday, Saturday afternoon, I went with three friends to a performance by the Oregon Repertory Singers.¹ One of our four is a Tenor in that group. After the concert, we four went to an Italian dinner, where we talked about what we had heard and felt, which interestingly (and I think significantly) ended up becoming a conversation about the nature of Heaven.

For some reason, as I looked out from my seat toward Tom the Tenor standing at the center of the top row, I remembered a poignant poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) called "Sympathy", whose last stanza reads:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, —
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,

¹ See: <https://www.orsingers.org>.

But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings —
I know why the caged bird sings!²

The selections, in the first half of the Program, seemed deliberately chosen, Spirit-inspired it seemed to me, because they had words noble and important. The pieces made us all feel that we *needed* to hear those words and to have them sung to us, beautifully sung. I felt coming to the concert that my “wing had been bruised” and “my bosom sore” at this American moment when our public ears are burned and scarred by ugly words, by words spoken with the intent to distort, to demean, to leave us feeling that a thief had broken in and vandalized our soul. I *needed* that performance yesterday; it activated deep within me “a prayer sent up from my heart's deep core.”

Proverbs 4:

²⁰ My child, pay attention to what I am telling you,
listen carefully to my words;*
²¹ do not let them out of your sight,
keep them deep in your heart.
²² For they are life to those who find them
and health to all humanity.
²³ More than all else, keep watch over your heart,
since here are the wellsprings of life.
²⁴ Turn your back on the mouth that misleads,
keep your distance from lips that deceive. ³

The concert yesterday did not solve anything; it gave no insight as to why we Americans (speaking generally) are indulging behaviors - alone or with or against others - for which I, when a boy indulging such behaviors, would have been spanked and appropriately scolded by my parents - “We do not allow this in our family.” But what the concert did in a way obvious to me was “wash over” me, or better, it “washed” me, substituting beautiful words for the ugly ones. The concert was not *entertainment* for me; it was *liturgy*.

² See: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46459/sympathy-56d22658afbc0>. “Among the latter [group of his poems] is one of his most popular poems, “*Sympathy*,” in which he expresses, in a somber tone, the plight of Black people in American society.”

* 3:21

³ *The New Jerusalem Bible* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Pr 4:20–24.

⁶ But you delight in sincerity of heart,
and in secret you teach me wisdom.^d
⁷ Purify me with hyssop^e till I am clean,
wash me till I am whiter than snow.* ⁴

The first piece sung was a choral arrangement of a prayer written by St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226; 45-years old) – now you will see what I mean by noble words.⁵ About this text, an editor and interpreter of Francis' works writes:

The biographies of Saint Francis written by Thomas of Celano and Saint Bonaventure characterize the early years of the saint's conversion as a struggle to discern God's will. Both of these authors, as well as the author of the *Legend of the Three Companions*, describe the scene in the deserted church of San Damiano in Assisi during which the young Francis heard a command of the Crucified Lord while he was absorbed in prayer.⁶ "Francis," the voice told him, "go and repair my house, which, as you see, is falling completely into ruin."⁷

A Text – A Prayer at the Crucifix⁸ in the Chapel of San Damiano (in the Fall or Winter of 1205, when he was 24-years old)

Most high,
glorious God,
enlighten the darkness of my heart
and give me, Lord,
a correct faith,
a certain hope,
a perfect charity,

* Ex 12:22j; Jb 9:30; Is 1:18; Ezk 36:25; Heb 9:13–14

⁴ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ps 51:6–7.

⁵ "Illumina le Tenebre", a choral arrangement by Joan Szymko of this text by St. Francis of Assisi. The prayer offered in this essay is translated from the critical edition of the works of St. Francis of Assisi.

⁶ For an account of this incident and its immediate impact on the young man Francis, see: <https://catholicexchange.com/st-francis-the-voice-from-san-damiano/>.

⁷ Francis and Clare, [*Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*](#), ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 103.

⁸ For a "reading" of this famous crucifix, see: <https://franciscanmissionservice.org/2012/10/san-damiano-cross-telling-the-history-of-christs-passion/>.

sense and knowledge,
so that I may carry out Your holy and true command.⁹

A Close Reading

“Most high, glorious God” – Notice Francis’ effort to find a way to address God sufficient to his *experience* of God – a personal God Who freely chose to reveal Himself to this young man. Francis at this point in his young life (24-years old) had never met a person who was even close to being as “high” above everyone or as “glorious” as God.

What Francis is trying to express is what the young man Isaiah sought to express when he also had an experience of God so beautiful, so majestic, so frightening:

Isaiah 6: ² Above him stood seraphs,^{10d} each one with six wings: two to cover its face,^e two to cover its feet^f and two for flying; ³ and they were shouting these words to each other:

Holy, holy, holy^g is Yahweh Sabaoth.
His glory fills the whole earth.*

⁴ The door-posts shook at the sound of their shouting, and the Temple was full of smoke.^h ⁵ Then I said:

‘Woe is me! I am lost,
for I am a man of unclean lips

⁹ Francis and Clare, [*Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*](#), ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 103.

¹⁰ The special title that the Church gave long ago to St. Francis of Assisi is the “**Seraphic Doctor**”. In the hierarchy of the nine Angelic Orders (articulated by Dionysius the Areopagite in the late 5th and early 6th centuries), the Seraphim are the order/rank of Angels closest to the Trinity, whose very essence is constituted of divine fire, in which case “fire” means LOVE – by love not that they *have* but by love that each one has completely *become*. Notice how it is that we do not say that God *has* love; we recognize that God *is* love.

* ⌈Rv 4:8; Nb 14:21

and I live among a people of unclean lips,
and my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh Sabaoth.*¹¹

Consider the contrast between, on the one hand, a man or woman trying sufficiently to name a person, even here a divine Person, which expresses his or her mature insight into why this person matters, and, on the other hand, a man or woman indulging in *name-calling* ... and people finding that amusing. It takes hard work, and love, to find the proper way to address a person (noble phrasing; tone of voice; facial expression), to get close to the other's true name – to speaking it worthily. And remember what it feels like when a person has had the ability to say *you*, your name, to *summon* you, not just to get your attention.

No one knows a man's true name but himself and his Namer. He may choose at length to tell it to his brother, or his wife, or his friend, yet even those few will never use it where any third person may hear it. In front of other people, they will, like other people, call him by his use-name, his nickname – such a name as Sparrowhawk, and Vetch, and Ogion, which means “fir cone.” If plain men hide their true name from all but a few they love and trust utterly, so much more must wizardly men, being more dangerous, and more endangered. Who knows a man's name, holds that man's life in his keeping. Thus, to Ged, who had lost faith in himself, Vetch had given that gift only a friend can give, the proof of unshaken, unshakable trust.¹²

“enlighten the darkness of my heart”¹³ – I think that it is natural for us to assume that

* Ex 19:16g; ▶40:34–35 ▶1 K 8:10–12 ▶Jn 12:41 ▶Rv 15:8; Ex 33:20i

¹¹ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Is 6:2–5.

¹² Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, chapter “The Loosing of the Shadow”, page 81. On the significance of names in the writings of Ursula K. Le Guin, and their connection to the real magic of the world, see, for example, Monica Uszerowicz (28 January 2018): “Before *Earthsea* there was the “The Rule of Names” and “The Word of Unbinding,” two short stories published in [Fantastic](#) that set up the concepts for the *Earthsea* realm. At the beginning of “The Rule of Names,” a schoolteacher reminds her class, “You never ask anybody his name. You never tell your own.” **The true name is sacred; its revelation is emblematic of deep trust. Words thwart and create equilibrium. Language is linked to power.**”

¹³ Pope Francis just published this month (October 2024) what is likely his last Encyclical, choosing as his theme “On the human and divine love of the heart of Jesus”. It can be found in full here: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/20241024-enciclica-dilexit-nos.html>. Early in the Encyclical he answers the question: “What do we mean by ‘the heart’?” And in part he writes: “The heart is also the locus of sincerity, where deceit and disguise have no place. It usually indicates our true intentions, what we really think, believe and desire, the “secrets” that we tell no one: in

by “darkness” here is meant sinfulness, some sort of moral sickness. But I wonder. If Francis meant “darkness” in this sense, then we might have expected him to name, with humility, the moral failing (s) that he means. He does not. Does it not make more sense that what Francis means derives from his awareness that *he is not familiar with his own soul*, that he cannot “go within” because *he does not yet know how*, that he cannot see his own depths? (Remember that this is a prayer from very early in his spiritual awakening.) He beseeches God to illuminate this “undiscovered country” - his inmost self.

I have considered Psalm 139 as the point of greatest mystical depth in the Book of Psalms. The Psalmist suddenly is given light see his depths (St. Teresa calls it the “interior castle”), the beauty of it, how much there is to “find” within, and how completely alive and present to him God is there. St. Francis prays that God would illuminate his (Francis’) soul – or his “heart”, to use the biblical word for the “inmost self”, the “hidden self” – so that he can see, and appreciate, what is there.

Psalm 139 –

¹³ You created my inmost self,
knit me together in my mother’s womb.*
¹⁴ For so many marvels I thank you;
a wonder am I, and all your works are wonders. ¹⁴

“faith ... hope ... charity” – What St. Francis asks God to give him here is not so much “things”, or “powers”, or specific “graces”. What he is asking is that God grant him a much closer, more intimate experience of friendship with Him, to be “a friend of God”. These three famous “theological” or “supernatural” virtues allow us to experience, if you will, what God is like *on the inside*. Francis is not asking God to give him discrete capacities; he is asking God to come closer – “closer to him than he is to himself”, asking God to make him more available to receive the closeness that Jesus insists that He made possible for us to experience and in which permanently to abide.

John 15 –

a word, the naked truth about ourselves. It is the part of us that is neither appearance nor illusion, but is instead authentic, real, entirely “who we are”.

* Jb 10:8seq. Ws 7:1

¹⁴ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ps 139:13–14.

¹⁵ I shall no longer call you servants,
because a servant does not know
the master's business;
I call you friends,
because I have made known to you
everything I have learnt from my Father. ¹⁵

An Action

All the great Religions of the world insist that the soul needs to have at hand a collection of holy words/prayers to say, prayers that one has memorized, which one can recite "by heart" (I love this expression). When one knows not what to say to God, he or she can reach for one of these prayers to pray.

My suggestion is that we memorize, learn by heart, this prayer of St. Francis. About which one scholar remarks: "Almost all of the manuscripts that contain this simple prayer indicate its origin at the foot of the crucifix in the church of San Damiano. It clearly reflects the struggle of the early years of the saint's life as well as his ever-present desire to fulfill the will of God. Thus it is a prayer that can be seen as characterizing the Poverello's¹⁶ entire life."¹⁷

¹⁵ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 15:15.

¹⁶ "Poverello" is a nickname the tradition has given to this humble ("little") poor man of God.

¹⁷ Francis and Clare, [*Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*](#), ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 103.