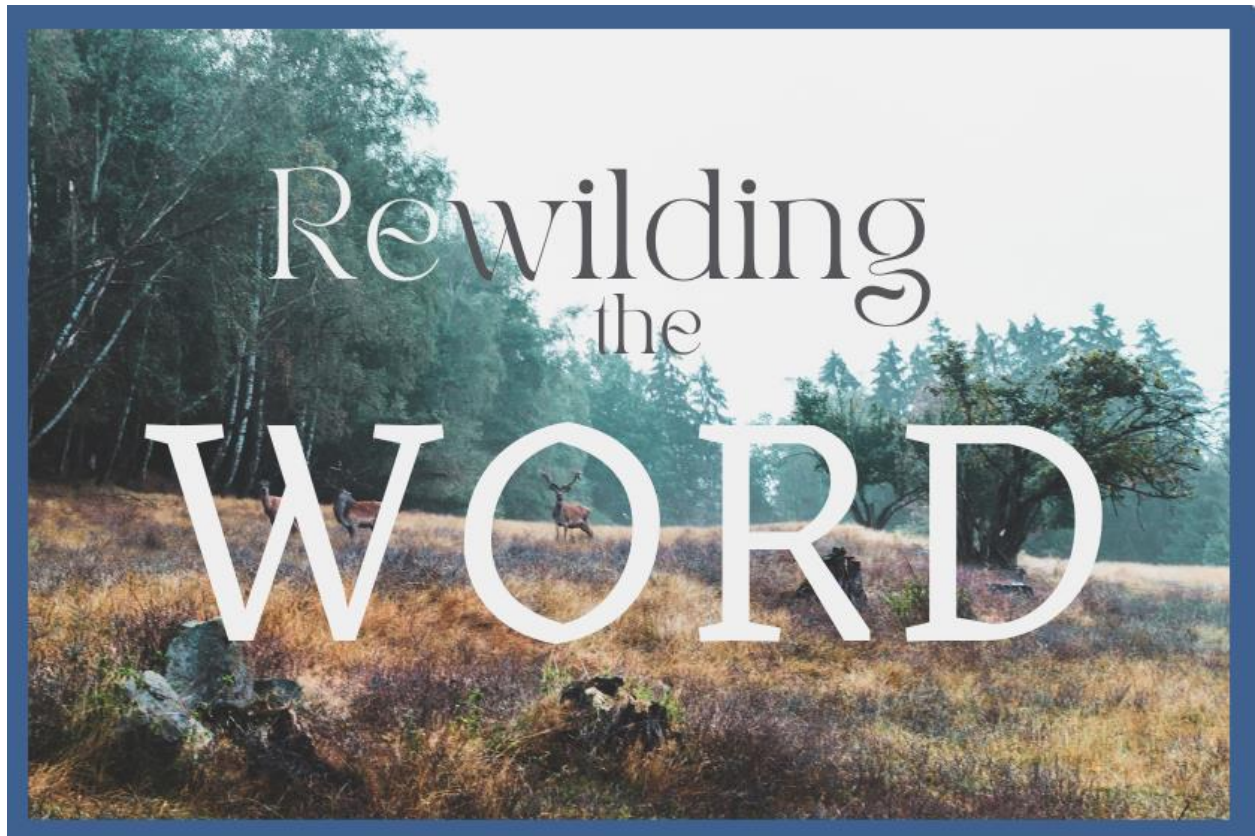

GANZ - #8 - REWILDING THE WORD (APRIL 2024)



A Story

A dear and fifty-year friend of mine died in March, on the 14th day, on the birthday of Albert Einstein (1879-1955). The latter wrote wisely such words as: "Imagination is the highest form of research." And "The only thing that interferes with my learning is my education." And "If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent ... read them more fairy tales."

Fr. Gordon Moreland, SJ (1932-2024) was a brilliant mind; this one quickly noticed about him, and I did when first I met him in 1973. But in the later years of his life, what impressed me more about him was his *imagination*. What do I mean by this?

Perhaps twenty-five years ago, Fr. Moreland went to a cemetery to lead a graveside service near where he lived and worked. He arrived to pray the prayers of committal,

saying such words as: “God of holiness and power, accept our prayers on behalf of your servant [the one to be buried]; do not count his deeds against him for in his heart he desired to do Your will. As his faith united him to your people on earth, so may your mercy join him to the angels in heaven.” But when he arrived at the gravesite – a wideness in the earth – there stood there only the two grave diggers. There was *not even one* person who had showed up to bid goodbye to the young man named Tony.

In all his years as a Priest, he had never experienced so total an alienation of one person from everyone else. He had not thought (and neither did I) that such a thing could ever happen. The experience deeply rattled Fr. Moreland, and I was upset when he told me the story of that day soon after it had happened. I was compelled to wonder about the limits of mercy. I felt that those who had refused the goodbye to Tony had themselves died, a death of mercy in them gobbled up by a voracious and implacable “justice”. I could not un-hear in my mind expressions such as “Good riddance!”¹

There is a further story about what came of this, and it is worth telling. But I cannot do that here. Not even on my best day could I compose words sufficient for that story.

But what I can mention is that one result of this in the life of Fr. Moreland, SJ was that he obtained a photograph of that Tony and placed it under the altar cloth on the altar at which he celebrated each day the Eucharist (as is the custom of Catholics). At the place of meeting of heaven and earth – the altar – there Gordon placed Tony, as if the only thing worthy to bind together heaven and earth was the life of one who was despised:

Isaiah 53 (NRSV):

³ He was despised and rejected by others;
 a man of suffering^a and acquainted with infirmity;
 and as one from whom others hide their faces^b
 he was despised, and we held him of no account. ²

Eventually under that same altar cloth, Fr. Moreland would place the photographs of some of our nation’s most notorious murderers, rapists, and thieves - this congregation hidden under the white cloth. They gathered there unknown to anyone who celebrated with Fr. Moreland at that altar, a group whom Fr. Moreland felt most *deserved* (ah, that

¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**riddance**” - **1.a. - 1524** - A deliverance or relief which consists in getting rid of something. Frequently with modifying adjective, as *good, happy*, etc.

^a Or a man of sorrows

^b Or as one who hides his face from us

² [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version](#) (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Is 53:3.

tricky verb) to be there. "Lord, to whom else should we go?" And into the formal prayer Fr. Moreland added, "May the souls of the faithful *and the unfaithful* departed through the mercy of God rest in peace."

This is about a profound development in Fr. Moreland's imagination as it related to mercy, imagining how far mercy could extend. There had become a *wideness* in his mercy.

A Text - "There is a Wideness in God's Mercy" (1862) by Frederick William Faber (1814-1863, 49-years old)³

1 - **There's a wideness in God's mercy,**
like the wideness of the sea.
There's a kindness in God's justice,
which is more than liberty.

2 - There is welcome for the sinner,
and more graces for the good.
There is mercy with the Savior,
there is healing in his blood.

3 - **But we make God's love too narrow**
by false limits of our own,
and we magnify its strictness
with a zeal God will not own.

4 - For the love of God is broader
than the measures of the mind,
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

5 - If our love were but more simple,
we should rest upon God's word,
and our lives would be illumined

³ In *Hymnary.org* website: **Faber, Frederick William, D.D.**, son of Mr. T. H. Faber, was born at Calverley Vicarage, Yorkshire, June 28, 1814, and educated at Balliol College, Oxford, graduating B.A. in 1836. He was for some time a Fellow of University College, in the same University. Taking Holy Orders in 1837, he became Rector of Elton, Huntingdonshire, in 1843, but in 1846 he seceded to the Church of Rome. After residing for some time at St. Wilfrid's, Staffordshire, he went to London in 1849, and established the London "Oratorians," or, "Priests of the Congregation of St. Philip Neri," in King William Street, Strand. In 1854 the Oratory was removed to Brompton. Dr. Faber died Sept. 26, 1863.

by the presence of our Lord.

A Close Reading

“There’s a wideness” – This is such an unexpected way of describing mercy ... as *wide*.⁴ The author takes his cue from Psalm 103, where in verses 11 and 12 the Psalmist uses physical expansiveness or vastness as a way of characterizing a mercy in God that exceeds our ability to measure it.

¹¹ For as the heavens tower over the earth,
so his mercy towers over those who fear him.^d

¹² As far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our sins from us.⁵

By using this idea of “wideness”, the hymnist gets us to wonder about how easy it might be for someone, perhaps especially for the Divine Majesty, to measure how far *our* mercy extends!

Matthew 18: ²¹ Then Peter approaching asked him, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?” ²² *Jesus answered, “I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.⁶

There is a Wideness.

“in God’s mercy” – When mercy is something that we *have*, which is very often how we speak about it, then mercy will always be about *how much* we have, or ought to have. We imagine that “mercy” is a kind of thing - an amount of it - which we can *distribute* if

⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**wide**” – **I.1.a.i. - Old English** – Having great spatial extent, esp. horizontally; vast, extensive, spacious, ample. In later use chiefly as a conventional epithet of words denoting an extensive area, esp. the earth or the sea (often *poetic* and *rhetorical*).

^d Is 55:9.

⁵ [*New American Bible*](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ps 103:11–12.

ⁿ 6:12; Lk 17:4.

* *Seventy-seven times*: the Greek corresponds exactly to the LXX of Gn 4:24. There is probably an allusion, by contrast, to the limitless vengeance of Lamech in the Genesis text. **In any case, what is demanded of the disciples is limitless forgiveness.**

⁶ [*New American Bible*](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Mt 18:21–22.

we choose, which having used it (obviously on someone not deserving it) we can feel that we have given *enough* of it. And now that we think about it, we begin to perceive that *how much* mercy we extend to a person is a calculation about how badly, or to what degree, he or she *needs* it. There is, then, hidden behind our understanding of mercy a *confident judgment* as to the degree of badness or wrongness of that person. Suddenly we are faced with a mercy – our amount of mercy – that is anything but *wide*. And suddenly the words of Jesus sting us; we feel their bite –

Matthew 7: ² For as you judge, so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you.^{c7}

In God mercy is Who God *is*; it is not something that God *has*. It is something essential to the *personality* of the Triune God, a mode by which we experience God's love as unconditional. A favorite name of Jesus Christ is "the Divine mercy". Repeatedly in the Gospels, Jesus in different ways defeats any Religion that has an affection for *counting* things: How many? How often? How much? How far? How bad? How good?

"But we make God's love too narrow" – This entire verse 3 is magnificent. There is a stunning sharpness of judgment about us human beings. It startles us. It pierces us with such clarity that we feel not so much wounded *as finally found out!* The hymnist is right about us! But then notice where the hymnist *locates* this judgment – in the third stanza in the hymn. The very structure of the hymn is an expression how the divine Mercy works, *surrounding* what is worst is us by what is best in God. This "damning" third stanza sits at the exact center of the five stanzas. That stanza is *held*, if you will, by two hands, held by the two verses before it and by the two verses after it. I feel, if you will, Christ's two hands open and holding my face, turning with such gentleness my embarrassed face up to Him, getting me to look Him in the eyes:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything.⁸

There is a wideness.

^c Wis 12:22; Mk 4:24.

⁷ [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Mt 7:2.

⁸ George Herbert, "Love, III" (1633).

We might have expected that the hymn would address us, as often formal Religion has (Jesus became particularly irked by this during His earthly life). A too-human Religion has often placed at the front of its concern about us our unredeemed and graceless way of being human beings making sure that we own up to that *before* we hear of God's decision to love us anyway.

But *we make* God's love too narrow.

An Action

We are living in an American moment when our inner tumult, our soul's discontents, are loud, hard to miss, hard to ignore because we are encouraged to indulge them. Consider this spiritual exercise. Let us look upon a particularly malignant, odious personality. We see him or her in person; we see him or her on TV; or we see him or her in our imagination as his or her personal ugliness is described to us. Imagine, then, that you are standing in front of but a little to the side of Jesus. Look at His face looking at that odious personality. What do you see on His face? Let yourself experience a *narrowness* in your mercy as you see Christ looking with unconditional love on that hateful other. "God *really does* love him or her. How clearly this is revealed on His beautiful face." By looking at Jesus' face pray to our dear Lord for a *widening* in your mercy towards that morally ugly person. What would it be like to have a face like His?