

MAYFLOWER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
3901 NORTHWEST 63RD STREET
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73116
DR. ROBIN R. MEYERS, SENIOR MINISTER
405-842-8897
cyasunday@mayflowerucc.org
www.mayflowerucc.org
© by Robin Meyers

Mayflower 11/01/09
“Love After Love”
Radio 11/08/09
by Derek Walcott

I AM NOT MY HABITUAL SELF

Derek Walcott, who hails from St. Lucia in the Caribbean, won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1992. He is famous for writing long poems that embody the tension of having grown up in two cultures — that of the island itself, and that of its British rulers. But in this poem, he is celebrating a different tension — that between two selves who suddenly pass one another in a moment of recognition – greet each other, and in a moment of exuberance each invites the other to a sacramental meal.

It does not matter who you are, in this poem we return again to the most familiar theme from all of the poems we have read and studied together: the alienation of the true self from what we might call the habitual self. In different ways, our poets so far have tried to tell us that our public self, our busy self, our multitasking, competitive, recognition-seeking self is not our true self. It is not our soul.

When I was a child, I saw a bumper sticker on a car one day that said: I FIGHT POVERTY, I WORK. I remember thinking even at the time that this was an arrogant oversimplification — but also a deep and deadly illusion in western culture. It presumes that all anyone has to do is try harder, and that ultimately, we can all make ourselves into whatever we wish to become. Those who have failed have only failed themselves, and the best way to help others is to help yourself.

This is essentially the view of human nature that undergirds free market capitalism and the autonomy of the individual. We are all self-made men and women. We all make our money the old fashioned way, as Smith Barney used to put it. We earn it. Actually, truth be known, the old-fashioned way to make money is to inherit it!

But we prefer this myth of the rugged individual, because it helps us to deal with the guilt we might otherwise feel if we were to confront the fact that many are born into circumstances so desperately broken that they have nothing approaching the chance that many of us had to make it in the world. And we like to think we did it all by ourselves, but nothing could be further from the truth.

I was born a white male into an intact family that surrounded me with love and support. I never doubted that I was loved, which is the greatest gift that any child can be given. No one ever looked at me and hated me for the color of my skin, or leered at me as if I was an object to be possessed. I grew up in a family of language and conversation, of political involvement and the importance of ideas. I did not make myself. I simply recognized a path laid out for me from birth. I unfolded into a life that was a gift to me to begin with, not an accomplishment on my part.

I say this not to presume that everything is pre-determined, because I believe that our choices still matter. But rather to join in the spirit of this poem by acknowledging that much of what we become in this life was there from the beginning, a true self that was embryonic, or as Jeremiah puts it by speaking in the voice of the Lord: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you and before you were born I consecrated you."

Just as the oak tree is already present in the acorn, my right-handedness, my sexuality, my extroversion, my sense of the world as open and available and welcoming to me were all present from the moment I first cried and someone picked me up. I did nothing to earn it, and this world would be a more humble and compassionate place if we could just get over ourselves.

Even our joys and our trials are present from the beginning. The rabbis used to say that when you are about to be born, God takes you to a field covered with bundles. "Each bundle represents a particular set of troubles. You can choose any bundle, but the one you choose you have to take to Earth with you. The rabbis say that if, at the moment of death, God were to take you back to that field and let you choose another bundle with which to relive your life, you would always pick the same one."

This might also be true of the bundles of joys. But the illusion we carry around with us is that we have to think up what we have to do, when in fact who you are is largely present from the beginning. Your task is not to make yourself, but rather to recognize yourself.

On Friday Shawn and I drove up to Wichita where I gave a lecture about my book, and then conducted a workshop on the future of the church in the church my father had founded, University Congregational Church. There were many people there who had known me from childhood. One in particular, Elaine Nigh, was my piano teacher. During a workshop portion of the meeting, in which I asked people to imagine the kind of church that would be irresistible to them, Elaine came to the microphone and began by saying, “I was Robin’s piano teacher. He did not always practice.” The whole place erupted in laughter.

My mother did the best she could. She made me pay for my lessons when I did not practice, but nothing worked. I learned one song, “Poor Lonesome Cowboy” and my musical career, which was never in me to begin with, ended. At just about the same time, I began writing poetry — all by myself, in a journal, and not for anyone to read, and not for a grade. I did this because there was a writer in me from the beginning — but there was never a piano player.

I wish I could play the piano. Other people wish they could write. What’s nice is that the world has both kinds of people in it, and others who can bake bread, and fix broken pipes, and make children learn. Mozart had music in his head you know. All those musical geniuses did. If they had written it down in a kind of creative exorcism, it would probably have driven them mad.

The problem comes, the poet may be saying to us, when we try to make something happen to please someone else, or to make something of ourselves based on listening to a voice that is not our own. This is what Walcott means, I believe, when he says that we have ignored that stranger for another. It has been there all along, but we don’t know how to recognize it because we think that we are in charge of how our life unfolds. There is a deeper, truer life that is always running beneath the surface of what I am calling the habitual self. And sometimes, in a moment of rare and even startling clarity, the true self meets the habitual self — the “you” that you have imagined yourself to be for so long will finally greet this other “you” and both will smile in welcome.

Be advised, the habitual self, the conscious, public self, does not like competition. It has a schedule; it has a dress code; it has a way of maintaining the equilibrium of image so that no one out there will be confused about who we really are — most of all ourselves. When someone asks us how we are doing and we say, “I’m staying busy —very busy.”

Imagine if we said instead: “Oh, sometimes my real self wakes me up at night, and invites my habitual self to break bread.” That’s why a better question than, “How are you?” is “How goes it with your soul.” Remember

Whitman's line: "I believe in you my soul . . . the other that I am must not debase itself to you,/And you must not be abased to the other."

Have you noticed how often poets are assuming the most basic human experience is the tension between exile and homecoming? This is an essentially religious idea in the best sense of that word – because there slumbers in all of us a place called home. That's why Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee." In other words, we should never forget that we did not make ourselves, and that we for all the ways in which we wander, we are always being called home — to a place, as the Koran puts it, that is as the jugular vein in our neck, and yet somehow elusive.

Sometimes I think this essence is most fully present in children, and even in teenagers (although they seem to be on another planet) because they are not yet fatigued by the making of a public reputation. Their world is still fogged over by their dreams and by their immediately accessible emotions. We experience them as volatile. But they see themselves as misunderstood. My sixteen year old son is sometimes a master at piercing my own disguises.

What is the spiritual life at its best but a homecoming? "Give wine. Give bread." This is a joyous communion with yourself, with the life that knows you by heart, knows every twist and turn that you have made. It contains everything that you are, including your alienation. We all wander off. But without exile, there is no homecoming, so remember what Rumi said: Straying maps the path.

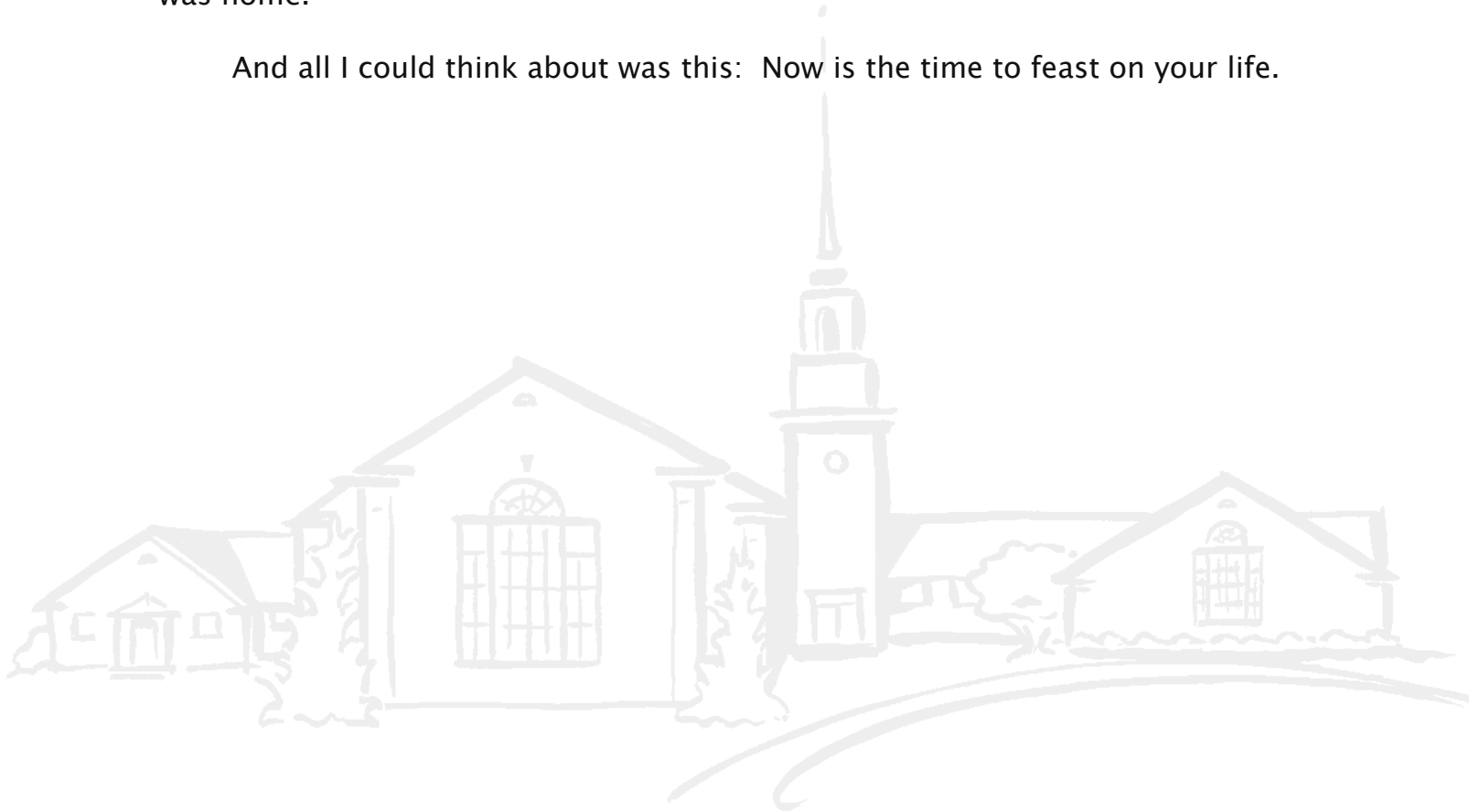
We can all become too comfortable doing and being what other people want us to do and be. So Walcott urges us to "Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,/The photographs, the desperate notes," because these can sometimes be like a veil of loss fed by old memories that keep us hidden from ourselves. We should not go looking for ourselves as some former version of ourselves. Rather we should look for signs that what we really are will one day pass us in the hall, turn and say, "Is that you?" And we will respond, startled, "No, you are me."

A therapist tells the story of a troubled client who confessed one day that he had a dream in which he met himself coming and going. But instead of comforting him, the therapist said, "Well I hope you invited your-selves to dinner."

It was strange for me to revisit my father's church yesterday, the one that everyone assumed that I would take over one day, of course –like father like son. But that is not who I am; this is who I am. And so when I came home last

night, and the almost full moon rose over the fiery trees in the cul de sac where I live and a few goblins wandered up to my door in search of candy I knew that I was home.

And all I could think about was this: Now is the time to feast on your life.



Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, November 1, 2009

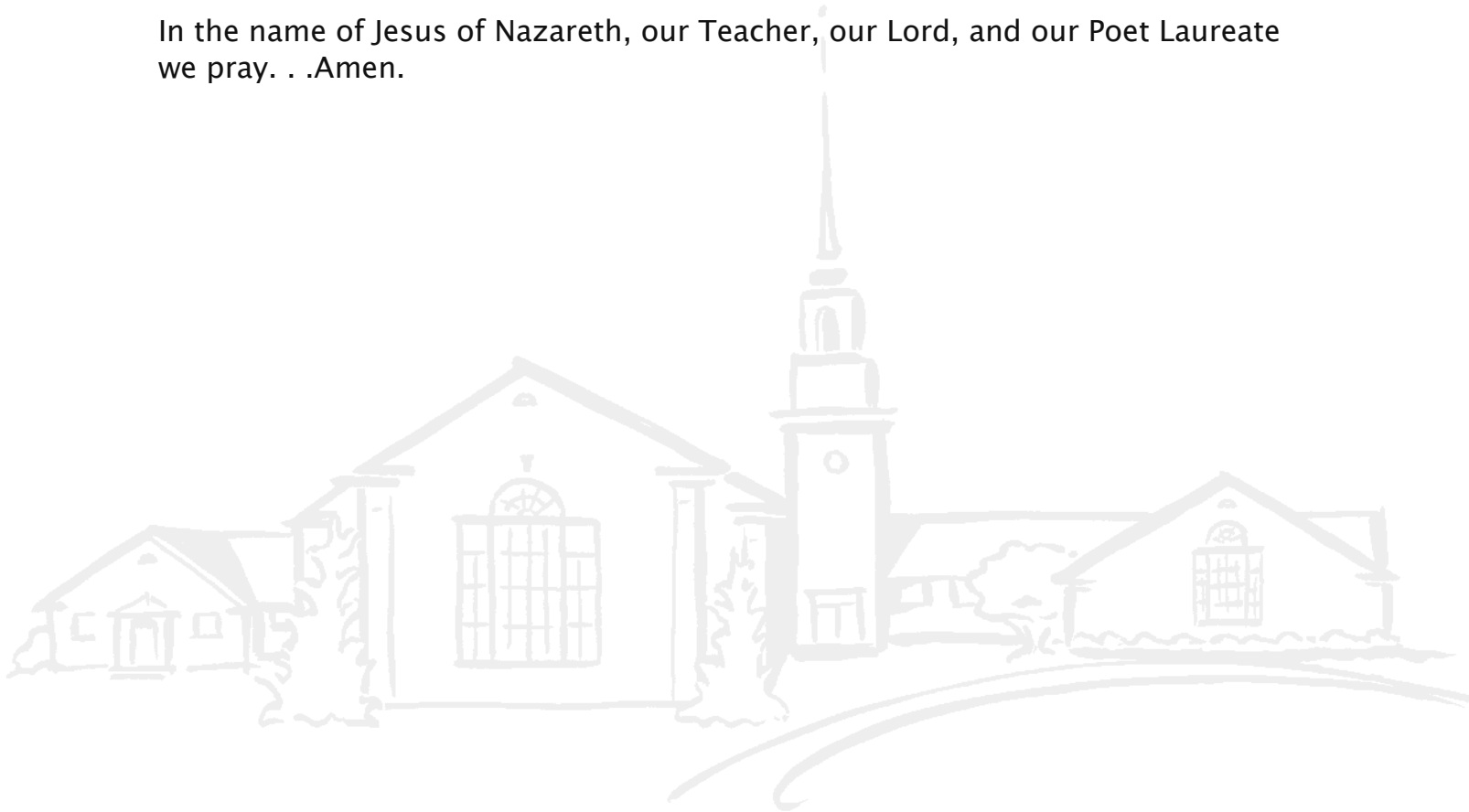
Lord of Life, it is All Saints Day. And who are the saints? They are not celebrities. They are not wizards on the field of play; they are not the rich and famous whose lives we mistake for success. The saints are weary mothers and fathers pacing the floor with the crying child in the middle of the night; the saints are dividing a portion of their own food to feed someone else. The saints are tending a garden out of sight, and talking to the trees in their backyard.

The saints are not taking themselves too seriously so that other might take their example seriously. The saints are troubled by injustice, but not to feel superior, but rather to break the conspiracy of silence. The saints are in love with animals who love them back. The saints are stardust; they are golden; and they've already gotten back to the garden.

They toil in the back room at the post office; they volunteer to teach the Whiz kids; they feed the homeless; they do not complain. The saints. There is nothing plaster about them. But for all of them, who from their labors rest,

who to the world their stead-fast faith confessed—we give thanks. Were it not for the saints, there would be no world for the sinners.

In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, our Teacher, our Lord, and our Poet Laureate we pray. . .Amen.



Copyright 2009 Robin Meyers

9

LOVE AFTER LOVE

By Derek Walcott

The time will come

When, with elation,

*You will greet yourself arriving
At your own door, in your own mirror,
And each will smile at the other's welcome,*

And say, sit here, Eat.

You will love again the stranger who was your self.

Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart

To itself, to the stranger who has loved you

All your life, whom you ignored

For another, who knows you by heart.

Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

The photographs, the desperate notes,

Peel your image from the mirror.

Sit. Feast on your life.

Copyright 2009 Robin Meyers