

Church of the Crossroads
Trinity Sunday
June 3, 2007
Neal MacPherson

“DELIGHTING IN THE HUMAN RACE”

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
Psalm 8
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 19:1-10

You may recall the song “From a Distance” that was made popular by Bette Midler.

*From a distance the world looks blue and green;
and the snow-capped mountains white.
From a distance the ocean meets the stream,
and the eagle takes to flight.*

*From a distance, there is harmony,
and it echoes throughout the land.
It's the voice of hope, it's the voice of peace,
It's the voice of every man.*

*From a distance we all have enough,
and no one is in need.
And there are no guns, no bombs, and no
disease,
no hungry mouths to feed.*

*From a distance we see instruments
marching in a common band.
Playing songs of hope, playing songs of peace.
They're the songs of every man.
God is watching us, God is watching us.
God is watching us from a distance.*

One can certainly appreciate the intent of this song. The song intends to open us to the possibility of peace and harmony in the earth. Yet, in spite

of its good intentions, the song is bad theology. Let me say why I believe this to be true.

There is an assumption behind the song that if you get too close to the earth, if you get too close to other human beings, then the vision of peace and harmony will fade, and we will begin to see all that is wrong in the earth and with the human race. We will see the earth as it really is, its forests disappearing and its life threatened, and we will see human beings as they really are: violent and selfish and destructive. However, as long as we view things from a distance, everything and everyone will appear healthy and whole.

The song is probably trying to save us from cynicism, which is perhaps commendable. Cynicism arises in us when our sight is taken over by all that is wrong in the earth, when we are no longer able to see beauty of the creation and the goodness that may be found in others. We think that as long as we do not get too close to the earth and to people, we will be saved from becoming cynical.

Some of you know how much I am enjoying the opportunity to become re-acquainted with the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. In a way, I am hearing Niebuhr as if for the first time. Why did he not impress me more when I was younger? Perhaps it may be that I have now had enough human experience and experience in the church to appreciate what he has to say.

Words that Niebuhr wrote as a young man when he was the pastor of an urban church in Detroit have a direct bearing upon what I want to say this morning. The book is called *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. Here are the words, written in the year 1926:

Cynics sometimes insinuate that you can love people only if you don't know them too well; that a too intimate contact with the foibles and idiosyncrasies of men will tempt one to be a misanthrope [hater of humanity]. I have not found it so. I save myself from cynicism by knowing individuals, and knowing them intimately. If I viewed humanity only from some distant and high perspective I could not save myself from misanthropy [from hating humanity]. I think the reason is simply that people are not as decent in their larger relationship as in their more intimate contacts. (*Leaves*, 76.)

This perspective is exactly the opposite from the one we find in Bette Midler's song. This perspective says that when we view humanity from afar, it is then that we see them at their worst—violent, greedy, and destructive. We are saved from any kind of cynicism, then, only by knowing human beings intimately.

What a relief, but not only a relief, but true to the scriptures as well. In the Book of Proverbs, Wisdom is portrayed as the feminine part of God. She is described as a master worker, deeply involved in the creation of the world, including the creation of humankind. It is from the perspective of intimate involvement that Wisdom rejoices in God's inhabited world and delights in the human race:

*. . . when God assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress
God's command,
when God marked out the foundations of the
earth,
then I was beside God, like a master worker;
and I was daily God's delight,
rejoicing before God always,
rejoicing in God's inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.*

Proverbs 8:29-31

Indeed, in creating the earth, God created something that is good, and in creating human beings, God made them just a little lower than God's own self, and "crowned them with glory and honor." (Ps 8:3) There's no hatred of humanity, no cynicism here.

Then, the whole incarnation speaks of God's deep involvement in the world. In Jesus, Emmanuel – God-with-us, God identifies herself with us, becomes one of us! God is both with us and for us! By becoming one with us and for us, God refuses to view us from a distance. Just the opposite. No wonder Jesus looks upon Zacchaeus, up there in the tree, and asks him to climb down. Jesus must stay at his house today. This is a picture, not of distance, but of intimacy.

As Niebuhr said, it is our intimate relationship with one another that saves us from cynicism. I too have found this so, here at Crossroads. Whenever I am tempted by cynicism, when I am tempted to look upon humankind with disdain, I think about you and my relationship with you, and I find myself delighting in the human race. For if Wisdom can delight in the human race, why cannot we?

Intimacy, however, is not easily attained, even here in our beloved community. Intimacy is impossible without empathy, and empathy requires an openness of heart, which comes only when we allow our hearts to break open. Perhaps you may know that in July I will be participating in a retreat in Michigan led by the Quaker teacher and writer, Parker Palmer. This is what Parker Palmer has written in a wonderful essay, “The Politics of the Brokenhearted.”

As long as we are mortal creatures who love other mortals, heartbreak will be a staple of our lives. And all heartbreak, personal and political, will confront us with the same choice. Will we hold our hearts open and keep trying to love, even as love makes us more vulnerable to the losses that break our hearts? Or will we shut down or lash out, refusing to risk love again and seeking refuge in withdrawal or hostility?

(“The Politics of . . .” in *Deepening the American Dream*, p. 232.)

Palmer goes on to say that in Christian tradition, it is the image of the cross that most profoundly describes the broken heart of God. He writes, “It was on the cross that God’s heart was broken for the sake of humankind.” (p. 233.)

I believe that intimacy, the kind of intimacy that leads to true empathy, has been made possible in our community only as we have allowed ourselves to reveal our own broken hearts, our own foibles and failures and idiosyncrasies, our own experiences of loss, and that it is out of this crucible that we find ourselves delighting in the human race. Furthermore, it is out of our own brokenness that we get in touch with the broken heart of God, symbolized by the cross, and it is this that enables us to regard no one, not even the enemy, from a human point of view, but as a new creation, if only potentially. (2 Cor 5:16-17)

Of course, as Reinhold Niebuhr would remind us again and again, when we venture forth from our relationships within our community of faith and enter those larger social relationships in the wider world, love and the empathy love requires becomes more and more difficult. It is not always easy to delight in the human race on a larger scale. Yet, the fact that we do come to know and value other human beings, and delight in them, in the community of faith, does indeed give us hope that the world itself can come to know a measure of renewal and redemption. I say a *measure* of renewal and redemption, for I have come to believe that utopian thinking is, in the end, futile and disappointing. We can never achieve the perfect world or the perfect human race, in other words a utopia, but we can hold forth the possibility of redemption and transformation nonetheless, here and there.

So, my friends, we may enjoy Bette Midler's song, but let us resist its invitation to view the world from a distance. As God in Christ Jesus chose to be involved deeply in the life of the creation and in the life of humankind, so deeply that the heart of God was broken wide open, let us be deeply involved in life as we know it, allowing our own hearts to be broken open so that we may love the creation and one another as we would love ourselves, and also those beyond our ken, even strangers and enemies. So will we, along with Wisdom, God's master builder, rejoice in the inhabited world and delight in the human race, always.