

## “A Homily for BlueGrass Sunday”

This morning these words are simply a love note to the choir,  
And especially to Laura, retiring in June,  
And a love note to this World Beloved that is our home,  
And to bluegrass music, and to our guitarists and singers,  
And to Carol Barnett, the composer, who wrote this music  
She said, because she wanted the chance to  
*‘write cheery sacred music, something that is all too rare  
In a medium rife with staid and lugubrious settings.’*  
*Lugubrious.* Now’s there’s a word.

Sometimes some of you ask me, the minister:  
*Mr. Minister, what is your spiritual practice?*  
And usually I mumble something about riding my bicycle  
Or reading poems.  
But truth be told it has been listening these last years  
on Thursdays and Sundays  
As Laura and the choir rehearse before the worship begins,  
either from office back there, the door propped open,  
or from the pew up here, pretending to look busy.

All along the music has done for me what I know it does for you:  
It has oiled those hinges on the doors we have on the heart –  
Did you know we have those? –  
We do, and the music has oiled those hinges and allowed  
Us to open up and feel things and notice things and be available  
To things we never otherwise would.

How do I know this?

One way I know is that Laura has been able to get us to sing things  
Of a certain theological bent that I know I would never get away  
With if I tried to share them in a sermon.

It's amazing what we will sing when we sing in Latin...or in bluegrass!  
But then that is why we call ourselves the church of the Big Tent,  
The church of the open door, the church of inspiration that comes to us  
In many forms and in many ways.

Back to the love note.

As I have been listening to the choir and Laura  
Rehearse Carol Barnett's music these many weeks -

– *Nathan*, they would say, *you have*

*No idea how hard this is!* (and you're right, I don't) -

Hearing the words, in particular, from "Gloria" -

How the sunlight was launched, the rain was loosed,

The stars scattered across the sky, the mountains piled,

The plains rolled, the rivers and seas spilled...

In other words as I heard the music celebrate the world,

Saying "Glory to the World!"

I have been reminded of a story my now-retired colleague

Gary Smith tells about of a visit he made with his wife last spring

Out west to Arizona.

There was the Sonora desert, the red rocks of Sedona, the San Francisco

Peaks above Flagstaff, Monument Valley, the Painted Desert,

And saving the best for last, what did they see....?"

That's right, the Grand Canyon.

*“It was awesome, all of it. Magnificent, Awesome.”* Gary says.

That is, until Gary and his wife go to the Grand Canyon overlook –  
Just imagine what they saw: a blue, true dream of a sky,  
flaming red, orange, and indigo rocks,  
wind whistling in their hair,  
the Glory of Creation all out before them.

*Magnificent! awesome! Right?*

And then on his right he sees a boy and his parents sidle  
Up to the overlook.

I’m imagining the boy is silent for a moment, taking it all in.

Gary and wife, taking it all in.

Magnificent! Awesome!

And then the boy says to his mother:

*“What are we supposed to do here? Just Stare?”*

We laugh, but it’s our question, too, sometimes.

When we come to this sanctuary, maybe for the first time,  
No big screens, no fancy stain glass to distract us, no icons  
Because that is how the Puritans who built it wanted things:  
What are we supposed to do here in this room? We ask.  
Just sit and listen and be?

When we sit on our stoops or porches at the end of the day,  
The work not quite done, or the kids fighting inside the house,  
That low-level stress in us that sometimes never goes away,  
And then we look up just long enough to see sun setting behind

The architecture of the trees,  
Not the grand canyon, but still a wonder of the world:  
What are we supposed to do here? Just watch and breathe?

When we read the morning paper,  
And we read the stories that drive us crazy and leave us shaking our head  
Over what will become of this world,  
And then from behind us we feel the arms of a loved ones  
Encircle us, their chin on our back, their voice in our ear saying: Good Morning,  
And we ask: what are we supposed to do here?  
Just give thanks that we have love enough?

The question reminds me of Emerson, whose words Alex read for us earlier,  
And the moment I have told us about before  
That provoked that famous lecture where he went on to preach the heresy  
that the miracles spoken of in the bible are nothing next to the miracles  
available to us everyday in the commonness of life – some heresy, right?  
How one Sunday Emerson found himself sitting in the pews of  
First Parish in Concord  
Listening to the preacher warble on about this or that.  
And in a moment I am sure all of us have had, but hopefully not here,  
Emerson says:

*“Hearing him I was sorely tempted to say: I would go to church no more!*

Outside the clear windows of that Concord sanctuary a snow storm  
Was falling all around them.

The preacher continued to warble on, to drone on.

Watching the storm and watching the preacher, Emerson says:

*“The snow storm was real, but the preacher was merely spectral,  
And my eyes felt the sad contrast in looking at him,  
And then out of the window behind him  
Into that beautiful meteor of the snow.  
He had lived in vain. He had no word intimating  
That he had laughed or wept, was married or in love,  
Had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined.  
If he had ever lived, we were none the wiser for it.*

Emerson was talking about the preacher, but he was also talking about us.  
For him religion was not something outside of us.  
It wasn't, in the end, about beautiful sanctuaries or ordained ministers or budgets  
Or Bibles or dogmas or sermons or even amazing choirs on music Sundays.  
In the end religion is about what those things point us to,  
Whether they oil those doors of the heart  
and let love in, let soul in, let spirit in.  
Or in other words: what are we supposed to do here? Just stare?

And the answer, in the end, is yes, and ‘just listen.’  
Listen to the music. Listen to the words.  
Look outside the windows.  
The trees, the birds, the sun, the light coming through the windows,  
The person next to you breathing in and out.  
Listen. Watch. Stare.  
May our eyes be open enough to glimpse what is beautiful.  
May our hearts to be open enough to love what we have.  
May our spirits be open enough to receive the holiness that is here,  
That is now.

Laura and choir, we are yours.

Amen.