

“The Prayer I’m Trying to Unlearn”

“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Be not afraid.

Because this is what we are about:

We hold hope for each other when hope is hard to find.

We plant seeds that will one day grow.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

We cannot do everything,

But we can do something.

So forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That is how the light gets in.”

“Mr. Detering, it’s your turn,” she said,

Which was plain enough to see because I was next in line,

The long row of us sitting in one line – the girls with bare shins and blue-grey plaid skirts next to boys in navy blue pants,

Some faded white at the knees from too many slides

During heated games of kickball with the red ball that went for miles –

“Ugh,” I mutter, thinking the long bangs that were cool

In early in the early 80’s would hide the eye roll I added for emphasis.

“Mr. Detering, I see that! Don’t roll your eyes at me!” she said.

“Maybe you can share that, too, when you get inside. Go on, he’s waiting.”

To which I breathed out a big sigh, the sound of my breath bouncing off the stone walls and my shuffling feet and mingling with Sarah Benoit’s giggle,

Who I had nurtured a quiet crush on ever since the fifth grade when she lent me her eraser and in passing it to me her fingers touched mine.

“Go on, Nathan, the Lord doesn’t have all day!” she said,

Her right pointy finger pointing to the red velvet curtain

Behind which we were told redemption and forgiveness waited,

but then how come her pointy finger and throaty scowl

made it seem like I was in such bad trouble?

“I thought God existed beyond time,” I almost replied sassily back,

But then I knew she – let’s give her a name, Sister Antonio –

I knew Sister Antonio would make me pay in the form of cut recess time

And giving me the early 6a.m. Monday altar boy slot, which would punish

Not only me but also my dad,

Who converted from being a loose Christmas and Easter religionist to

Catholicism for my mom, and whose job it would be to drive me to that

Monday morning Mass and wait out in the car smoking cigarettes,

Not coming in because why?

Because I have my reasons, he would say,

Which was fair enough, because we all do, right?

And that is why I am so fond of that poem I sometimes quote from

Miller Williams, who says we ought to have compassion for everyone we

meet, even if they don’t want it, because we never know

the wars that are going on down where the spirit meets the bone.

What a challenge those words offer me in these political times;

Maybe there are for you , too.

“Hi, I’m here” I say, as I close the curtain and sit on the dark wooden shelf of a seat, my bony early teen tail bone nubbing against the wood just enough to put me instantly in discomfort and on alert, A feeling such at odds, such at ironic odds, with the painting magnificently hung to the left of the altar not ten feet away of Jesus cradling a single frightened sheep, The one in that parable of the shepherd who left his flock of 99 to find the one that had been lost, signaling that each one of us, no matter how lost, Deserves to be found and loved and tended to, no matter what, no matter where, no matter when, Which is a good thing to remember whenever we hear someone say they Are a Christian and then seem to favor the 99 who are found rather than The one who is lost. We forget just how revolutionary Jesus was in this way - Jesus, who was a person of color and not a blue-eyed, blonde Aryan; Jesus who was certainly more Che Guevara than Ann Rand.

Even then, even at that age, I so wanted to learn more about the God described in that painting, The Shepherd who led me beside still waters and sought after me When I lost my way. But instead the lesson I got was in that 4x4 dark corner of the church, We know it now as the Confessional but that back then, at age 13, Seemed like an interrogation room, The priest whispering through wired mesh and muted light that the Lord our God was ready to hear my sins, a word that more than any other word has

Produced a steady stream of customers for therapists,
But a word that means, as I have told us before, simply
To 'miss the mark.'

Anyone here missed the mark you were aiming at lately?
Anyone here need to get it off your chest and be told you are worthy of love
anyway?

Yes, of course. But instead of that healing message,
The darkness of the room, the confinement of the drawn curtain,
The secrecy of the faceless man behind the screen...conspired
To make me learn another kind of message: shame.
Shame for pinching my sister when she likely deserved it;
shame for the crush I had on Sarah Benoit;
shame for leaning over Derek's shoulder to peak at his algebra;
shame for the covetous longing I felt for the new Schwinn BMX in the
window.

And shame, too, for the secrets harder to say outloud:
For the adolescent self-doubt and insecurity and lost-ness that isn't always
adolescent, the wishing in the mirror to look different, to have more friends,
more popularity, more money, better skin, better smile, better anything than
What I am...

God's eye shining on all of it like a single light bulb on a string pulled on
during an interrogation,
Demanding the truth, no lawyer present,
Sign here for the confession, says God the bad cop, priest the bad cop,
Sister Antonio the bad cop,

And the good shepherd, ready with love,
stuck frozen in a painting on a wall,
Calling my name, looking for me, trying to lure me out of my secret, hiding
place.

I wonder: How do we unlearn the messages given us when we were younger
than we are now?

So that we can learn something new? So that we can be set free?

Because the prayer I have spent a lifetime unlearning,

That I know I'm not alone in trying to unlearn,

Is a prayer I'm calling "Blame Prayer" or "Shame Prayer" or "why the hell,
prayer!" "God is at the wheel so behave yourself in the backseat prayer!"

that says we have to earn back the love available to us,

A love that we lost and we lose when we screw up, as we do,

And a love that we lost and we lose when the world breaks, as it does,

So that the prayer becomes a plea to God or Life or the sky...

to restore us,

to make sense of the nonsensical, to explain why the terrible things happen,

to give purpose to cancer cells and earth quakes and

and tornadoes and before-their-time deaths,

either because God is capricious or become somewhere, someone is to
blame.

"God helps those who helps themselves" is a version of this prayer,

Which most people think is in the Bible but is actually something Ben
Franklin said, he who was famously antagonistic to Christianity.

It's a pray that blames the victim for the crime,

and seeks to meet out justice (but never mercy) upon those deemed
Lost or less than worthy or not faithful,
Which mean it was a prayer that surely rested this week on the lips of Khalid
Masood
As he drove his rented Hyundai into those people on Westminster bridge
In London,
Thinking them infidels and saying they must pay.

Watch out! Be afraid! I see you! says this prayer,
In which God is peeping Tom or, worse, God is Gestapo, God is president
paranoid about leaks and betrayals,
God who has reasons for things we simpletons cannot understand,
God who would punish 13yr old boys in confessionals for being and feeling
13,
And who only needed to be told instead:
Come by my side, be not afraid, you, my lost, little one,
Because even though you walk through dark valleys,
I am with you...

Some of you, especially you are who are new to our faith community,
Ask me what my vision for our shared ministry is,
And though I have the degrees and the training and the robe and the stole
To offer perhaps a lovely answer that might sit all lovely at the top
Of some lovely letter head you will never read,
My answer is this, you ready?
My vision for our shared ministry is *a making holy of the preposition*
'WITH.'

Why?

Because unlike the isolation of that confessional of my childhood,

All full of blame and shame and worry,

I know we can't do this ministry alone.

What is ministry? Forget the attire, ok, and the smells and bells

And sermons and chalices and pulpits and pews facing frontward.

Forget all that and remember instead that ministry is the practice

Of being 'WITH' each other...it's about being present, and showing up.

Because not to put too fine a point on it,

But in a world of sheep and shepherds

And walls and who's in and who's out

And dark valleys and shadows and wolves on the prowl,

In the meadows of these times we need the "WITH-NESS"

Of each other and of a God I call 'thou'

Who can help us learn new prayers of collaboration and companionship.

We need binoculars to help us see find the lost.

We need to learn how to use our hooks and crooks and canes for those lost
in the cracks.

We need healing hands to hold protest signs.

We need hospital visits.

We need immigration justice volunteers.

We need to tail bones in pews because we're here for each other.

We need wordless arms on shoulders.

We need auctions because God knows we need fun and superheroes,

Even if those heroes are our broken, barely able to fly selves.

We need flashlights and wristlight to light dark valleys.

We need the beautiful earth.

We need spring.

We need each other.

More than verbs or nouns or adjectives, we need the preposition “with”

So we don’t try to go it along.

We need psalms and opening words that say the Lord is not my punisher,

But instead the Lord is my Shepherd,

Even is the word Lord gets caught in your throat,

Because with your help, our help,

We can face whatever comes,

Joy overflowing,

And your goodness, and blessing and mercy will be with me and you

Every day of our lives.

So out of the confessional we come,

And let us stand in the light...with each other.