

Abuelo

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins
Proper 17 – Year C

In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen.

Good morning, and welcome to the Cathedral on this 12th Sunday after Pentecost. We are glad you are here as we turn the corner on summer and this long green season begins to change colors, and autumn slowly unfolds. Two words from the Epistle and the Gospel have been on my mind all week and I have wondered what, if any connection exists between them... humility and hospitality. The question then is how might these core values inform us as we live out our lives, and come to that, what do these two texts from the Lectionary this morning have to teach us?

Some time ago I was honored to serve as the officiant for my first Quinceanera, the wonderful coming of age ritual for young Latina women. As the congregation moved from Mikell Chapel to the post-quinceañera reception, the young woman whose service we had just celebrated said to me, “Padre Bill, *estás entre mis abuelos*,” or, “Father Bill, now you are among my grandfathers.” My learning curve is rapidly ascending both in terms of my language skills and my role in relation to the congregation, and it is a source of deep humility that they welcome me in those services, and it is a profound source of learning to bear witness to the ways the create hospitality. They have several names for me, including “Padre Guillermo,” and more recently, “Abuelo,” meaning “Grandfather.” The latter is perhaps my favorite name. As of Christmas Eve 2018 when our granddaughter Sophia was born, joining our twin grandchildren Jack and Alice, who call me “Granddaddy,” I am now *un abuelo multiplicado por tres* or, a grandfather times three.

So, how am I living into this new normal of being a grandfather, and how has it changed my ministry, my perspectives on life—my teaching and perhaps my sense of “*being in the world*,” as Heidegger called it? And come to that, what has being a grandfather taught me—if anything—about hospitality and humility?

Erik Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development include the penultimate stage of “generativity versus stagnation”. Typically, this stage takes place during middle adulthood between the ages of approximately 40 and 65, so becoming *un abuelo* is, in this sense, right on time for me. During this developmental stage—if one reaches it at all—adults strive to create or nurture things that will outlast them, often by parenting grandchildren, and by contributing to positive, “generative” changes that benefit the common good. Vicky and I spent much of our now 38 years of married life raising our two sons, and now, to see them have careers and children of their own gives us a deep sense of joy. We’ve had deeply satisfying careers, but these cannot compare to the delight in bearing witness to the unfolding of the lives of our sons, and, now, to see our grandchildren being born, grow and develop their own wonderfully distinctive lives.

And this is not all. A subtext in Erikson’s developmental narrative is that we become *more connected* to those aspects of our world that allow for a transcendence of self. We become more deeply aware that we are part of something larger than ourselves, a kind of operational theology of abundance. Wendell Berry hints at this when he says:

“Ask the questions that have no answers. Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias. Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant, that you will not live to harvest.”

I recently returned from northern Colorado and a week of trail running, hiking, and fellowship with friends of some 35

years. Each year we reconnect with one another, laugh, hike, and read and write. And we do all of this deep in a sub-alpine forest, deepening my awareness of connection to God's Creation and empathy for everything in it. And speaking of empathy, perhaps we can learn something from trees about being in community during what some are calling an "epidemic of polarization and loneliness" in our culture. Trees live communally in ways we are only beginning to understand. In his remarkable novel "The Overstory" Richard Powers writes about what we might call "grandparent trees":

"Before it dies, a Douglas fir, half a millennium old, will send its storehouse of chemicals back down into its roots and out through its fungal partners, donating its riches to the community pool in a last will and testament. We might well call these ancient benefactors *giving trees*...Trees communicate, over the air and through their roots...they take care of each other. Link enough trees together, and a forest grows aware."

In his recent book "The Second Mountain," David Brooks says this about the cultivation of *generative* moments of transcendence:

"The universe is alive and connected, these moments tell us. There are dimensions of existence you never could have imagined before. Quantum particles inexplicably flip together, even though they are separated by vast differences of time and space. Somehow the world is alive and communicating with itself. There is some interconnecting animating force, and we are awash in that force, which we with our paltry vocabulary call love."

Becoming a grandfather has indeed made me more aware of the beauty of non-binary, liminal spaces, where we greet the other with what in our Baptismal covenant we refer to as respecting the dignity of every human being, and where, as Emmanuel Levinas said, we welcome the infinite mystery of the Face of the other. In becoming *un abuelo*, I see artificial borders become diffuse and disappear. As one of my Hispanic parishioners said to me, "Padre, quiero sentirme vivo," or, "Father, I want to feel alive." As the *abuelo* in me comes alive, my connection to all of Creation comes alive as well, with more clarity, urgency and meaning. In this lovely poem Wendell Berry reminds us of both the long view of generativity, and the humility of our place in creation:

*I go by a field where once
I cultivated a few poor crops.
It is now covered with young trees,
for the forest that belongs here
has come back and reclaimed its own.
And I think of all the effort
I have wasted and all the time,
and of how much joy I took
in that failed work and how much
it taught me. For in so failing
I learned something of my place,
something of myself, and now
I welcome back the trees.*

Humility is, in this sense, learning something of our place, something of ourselves, and practicing hospitality, in this case understood as welcoming back the trees without which, of course, through the miracle of photosynthesis, life would not exist. And humility breeds the virtue of civility, in our world of change, which is about creating new possibilities for living forward while being different and even continuing to hold profound disagreement.

Yes, in this sense hospitality is a bridge to all the great virtues, but it is immediately accessible. We don't have to love or forgive or even feel compassion to extend hospitality. It is the creation of an inviting, trustworthy space — an atmosphere as much as a place. It shapes the experience to follow. It creates the intention, the spirit, and the boundaries for what is possible. When in doubt, dear ones, we are called to practice hospitality. And this requires a spirit of generous listening and patience — a commitment to move through the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. As Wendell Berry demonstrates, a spiritual view of time is a long view of time — seasonal and cyclical, resistant to the illusion of time as a bully, time as a matter of deadlines. Human transformation takes time — longer than we want it to — but it is what is necessary for social transformation. A long, patient view of time will replenish our sense of our capacities and our hope for the world. Humility

is a companion to curiosity, surprise, and delight or as our Baptismal prayer suggests, a sense of joy and wonder. This is the humility of the child. It is the humility in the spirituality of the scientist and the mystic — to be planted in what you know, while living expectantly for discoveries yet to come. The words we use shape how we understand ourselves, how we interpret the world and treat others....in short, how we practice resurrection.

Well, in thinking about becoming *un abuelo*...a grandfather, I found myself thinking about my paternal grandfather, whom I called “Pop,” and who owned a hardware store in middle Georgia. I loved him, and I loved the store, and now I am realizing yet again something he taught me...something about the intersection of humility and hospitality. For my grandfather, the store was a chance to live out his rule of life—his core values of compassion and justice. In my mind’s eye I can see myself as a young boy, shadowing along behind him as he assisted his customers with grace, and humor, and care. Whatever needed building, or replacing, or repairing, I believed he had the answer, and it could be found somewhere in the mysterious recesses of his store. It was filled from floor to ceiling with anything needed to supply the county seat of an area of Georgia still deeply agricultural. It smelled like mystery in there, a wonderful combination of leather, cottonseed oil, hot coffee, and fresh apples on an early fall day, or peaches in summertime, which could also be purchased in season near the cash register. My favorite spot in the store was atop that roll-top desk, where I could survey the entire store, and go largely unnoticed. From this vantage point, often armed with a small bottled coke from the cooler and a comic book, I could pass away an entire summer afternoon. Motes of dust rose in beams of sunlight as they moved across the store, marking time in a timeless, magical world that exists only in my memory now. I remember the way my grandfather treated his customers with dignity, and respect, many of whom were local farmers—black and white, sharecroppers and owners alike—who brought their stories to share, and their business. In the Jim Crow south of those days, he practiced business by casting a wide net of compassion. It was a wonderful space for a young boy to observe human nature, perched as I was in the threshold between the store and the lumber yard, a soft breeze wafting through, cooling on hot days, and warming on winter days when the pot-bellied stove labored in the corner. And, one afternoon—I was probably 8 or 9 years old—as I sat on his roll-top desk with my grandfather seated in his chair, a farmer came in for supplies. He was wearing overalls and dusty boots, and as he greeted him my grandfather stood up to shake his hand and welcome him warmly. After he conducted his business and left, I asked him, “Pop, why do you always stand up when customers come into the store?” His response was almost like—I would say exactly like Jesus’ words from our Gospel for today: *“Son,” he said, “every time someone walks into this store I am given an opportunity to do so much more than simply transact business. I have a chance to remind myself who God is calling me to be. We never know what someone may be going through. Some of these customers are poor and think they will never amount to much, some are rich, and think they deserve to be treated special because of it. Either way, it’s like the preacher says, we should humble ourselves, and extend hospitality to everyone. Son, never shake a man’s hand when you are sitting down. When they leave this store I want everyone to feel like they were treated with dignity and respect.”* He ambled off to another part of the store, this man who had become a generative “giving tree” for his grandson. Beams of light moved across the worn and polished wood floors, and the sparrows chirped high in the rafters. And a young boy sat, and wondered, and watched and imagined where life might take him. And now he is *un abuelo*, a grandfather himself, with the abiding hope of becoming a giving tree, with humility, and hospitality. May we all find angels to entertain, dear one’s, and may we let mutual love continue. Amen.