
Ever Living to Make Intercession

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 25 – Year B

In Memoriam: Matthew Albritton Frame, March 31, 1951 – July 24, 2015

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and our redeemer. Amen. —Psalm 19:14, paraphrase

If you're like me, we're fascinated with our own personality. However unhappy we may be with our lives or circumstances, we still find our *selfes* supremely interesting. "I may not be much," I heard a speaker say in a 12 step meeting years ago, "I may not be much. But I'm all I really think about." That's right. Even low esteem can keep us endlessly absorbed with ourselves for the rest of our lives. Now I'd like to catch some of that self-fascination for the purposes of our sermon today. And since I'm your preacher on this occasion, why not talk about myself? That's right, I'm no exception.

Now I first began to notice this kind of self-regard back in my college days. Even if you don't know me very well, you could probably guess that I've had somewhat of a melancholy or gloomy kind of temperament in my past. Well, back in college I came across the book by the Spanish or Basque philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno: the book called, *The Tragic Sense of Life* (1912). Now already, at the age of nineteen or twenty as a young African American man, that book so resonated with my outlook on the world that I would carry it around with me from classes to dining hall to coffee shop and to my friends' dormitory rooms.

It got so that the fellow student who became my best friend beginning in those days, Matt Frame, used to tease me about it. Upon greeting me on the campus he would say things like, "Well here comes old 'tragic sense of life' himself!" And any number of variations he would improvise. But finally he settled on a shortened version of the whole routine. And that version was versatile enough to be used either humorously or even in a more deeply reflective way. "Old Theophus," he would say, using my full first name as few people before or since have ever done. "Old Theophus," he could say in different tones and circumstances, whimsical or cheerful, or even commiserating with me about something: "Old Theophus."

If you've read C.S. Lewis' children stories you might relate me to the gloomy, melancholy character, Puddleglum. Even his name, of course, is meant to describe a downbeat, 'sad-sack' type of person. Now Puddleglum is a marsh wiggler in Narnia—that imaginary land of Narnia where even the animals can talk. And a marsh wiggler is a coastal-waters kind of creature with webbed feet and long flattened hair and with a lanky, fish-like appearance. But Puddleglum stands-out because of his personality: he's actually more upbeat than his fellow marsh wigglers.

In fact the other marsh wigglers are critical of Puddleglum for not being serious enough about life! Here's the way they chastise and counsel him in Lewis's story, *The Silver Chair*. Listen to this account as told by Puddleglum himself when he's being recruited for the adventure that the story is all about.

"Puddleglum,' [the other marsh wigglers say], 'You're altogether too full of bobance and bounce and high spirits. You've got to learn that life isn't all fricasseed frogs and ell pie. You want something to sober you down a bit. We're only saying it for

your own good, Puddleglum.' That's what they say.

And then Puddleglum goes on to describe the adventure he's being recruited for.

Now [an adventure] like this—a journey up north just as winter's beginning, looking for a prince that probably isn't there, by way of a ruined city nobody's ever seen—will be just the thing. If that doesn't steady a chap, I don't know what will." — [C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*](#)

Well now I've introduced you to Puddleglum's friends. But now I'd like to connect those friends to some missing characters in our Old Testament lesson appointed for today. Those key characters are notably 'missing in action' at the climax of the Job story. However for the majority of chapters in the story they had been overwhelmingly present. If you know the Book of Job then you know that these were Job's self-appointed counselors and friends. But like Puddleglum's fellow marsh wiggles in Lewis's Narnia story, these so-called counselors and friends had become critics and accusers.

As in the Narnia story Job's counselors also said things to him, as people often say, 'for your own good.' Indeed, precisely here we may begin to wonder: could it be that both sets of so-called friends or counselors had become so envious, conflicted or scandalized—scandalized by Puddleglum's good cheer in one case, and by Job's fabulous prosperity and good fortune on the other hand; could it be that they had become so envious, conflicted or scandalized that their counsel was laced with self-serving criticisms, underhanded accusations, and unaware attacks instead of showing real care and concern for their fellow creature?

By contrast, Job himself admits in today's reading that he had misspoken about God. As he says in the scripture:

I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know (vs. 3) . . .therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (vs. 6)

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you (vs. 5).

It's here of course that our Old Testament reading converges with our Gospel reading appointed for today, where blind Bartimaeus had also just heard of Jesus 'by the hearing of the ear,' but at the climax of the story can declare, 'but now my eye sees you.' Yes, Job and blind Bartimaeus both have their eyes opened, albeit different eyes opened in different ways—spiritual eyes in Job's case, physical eyes in Bartimaeus's case. But what about the characters who are missing-in-action in each of these stories too? What about Job's friends and counselors in his case, and what about the un-mentioned crowd in the case of blind Bartimaeus?

That's the crowd who, we recall, had 'sternly ordered Bartimaeus to be quiet.' An alternative translation is that they had 'rebuked' him when he first "heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth" and "began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Now why such a harsh reaction to a blind man's understandable appeal for Jesus to pay attention to him? Here we may proffer a similar suspicion as we proposed in the case of Lewis's Narnia story, and in the case of Job's friends: that in all three cases now the onlookers are envious of, or conflicted or scandalized by the life situation of those who have become the focus of their antagonized reactions.

The crowd doesn't just 'shush' Bartimaeus: they rebuke him, as if to say, 'Shame on you for calling attention to yourself like this! How dare you interfere with the teacher! What's the matter with you? Who do you think you are?—all of those responses that we're familiar with because we use them ourselves to target each other by antagonism. By contrast it is when God himself intervenes in the Job story, and when Jesus intervenes on behalf of blind Bartimaeus in the Gospel story, that everything shifts. God shows up, and the antagonists are nowhere to be seen anymore.

Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." (Mark 10:49)

"Take heart; get up, he is calling you." There it is, church friends, there's our key verse in the Gospel appointed for today. That's the intercessory watchword. It's the watchword that my college friend would intone implicitly when he called out to me, "Old Theophus"—as if to say, "Take heart; get up, God's good life is calling you . . . There's more here than the tragic sense. There's hope: your disabilities, your circumstance, are not the last word. They do not have the final say. There is One who can trump all of that.

'Take heart, get up; He's calling you' is preeminently the watchword that we hear in our Epistle reading appointed for

today from the Book of Hebrews, where we read this related verse:

It was fitting that we should have such a high priest (vs. 26) . . .
[who] is able for all time to save those who approach God through him,
since he always lives to make intercession for [us] (vs. 25).

There is One who is interceding for us if we would but ‘take heart, get up, and go to Him.’

When my college friend, Matt, died of cancer this past summer I realized that now I had someone else ‘on the other side’ who was now also ‘living to make intercession for *me*,’ as Jesus says elsewhere in scripture, ‘God is not God of the dead, but of the living’ (Matthew 22:32; Mark 12:27; Luke 20:38). It was just as I had realized years before following the deaths of loved ones—following my daughter’s death, Ereina in 1987 and the death of my second wife, Jane in 1997. In each case I had gained a loved one alongside our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who was now always living to encourage me to ‘take heart, get up; go to Him. Go to the one who eclipses my tragic sense of life.

Christian friends, it is in our power to be this intercessory cohort for one another even now. As the saying goes: ‘Why wait? Why wait until we’re in the afterlife, or among that ‘communion of saints’ (Latin: *communio sanctorum*). Let’s be interceding for one another now. Avoid the rush later!’ Just as our dearly departed loved ones, we know enough about each other’s lives in the way that intimate friends and counselors are supposed to be. We can pray with discernment, skillfully and sensitively about each other’s needs. So let’s abandon the places where we’re conflicted with one another, or envious or scandalized by one another and instead reach out for each other as intercessors.

Now the turning point in our Job story is not where he repents in dust and ashes. Rather, here’s his place, as scripture says:

And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he had *prayed for* his friends; and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before (Job 42:10).

Of course as we intercede for others—friend and foe alike—God may not restore our personal fortunes with ‘twice as much as we had before.’ Rather—instead, let us pray for an increase of “faith, hope and charity,” as we pray in the words of our Collect appointed for today. Let us pray as our Lord commands at the end of the Sermon on the Mount when he says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ^so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous . . . Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:44-45, 48). Intercede for them all!

And so we pray again in the words of our Collect, to increase our “faith, hope, and charity”—and while you’re at it please include in your prayers, if you will, old Theophus; that he might have an increase in faith and hope in the good life that our Lord has in store for us all.

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord . . . Amen.

Also: The exegesis that governs this sermon’s linking of scripture with issues of envy and scandal is derived from Paul Neuchterlein’s commentary in “Girardian Reflections on the Lectionary” for Proper 25B at http://girardianlectionary.net/year_b/proper25b.htm The following excerpt indicates Neuchterlein’s source analysis in the thought and writings of the late Franco-American scholar, René Girard (1923-2015). I include it here because of contemporary debates about Jesus that connect our private, individual lives and relationships to the social gospel (cf. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God*, Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics*.)

A CAUTIONARY POSTSCRIPT

The Cascading Impact of Personal Conflicts onto Public Targets

Scandals [in the New Testament sense of ‘stumblingblocks’], we found, are permanently conflictual relationships in our individual lives . . . [But whereas] we tend to feel that our private rivalries, our intense conflicts, do express something genuinely personal and unique in us . . . [they can] turn gregarious at the drop of a hat.

[Jesus] knows that scandals . . . become more so as they are exacerbated. They become more and more impersonal, anonymous, undifferentiated, and therefore interchangeable. Beyond a certain threshold of exasperation, scandals will substitute for one another, with no awareness on our part.

If we look carefully at the operation of scandals in the Gospels, we will have to conclude that they are very much the same thing as demonic and satanic possession, which is also characterized by a process of transference [onto surrogate victims] . . .

All those who join a belligerent crowd . . . transfer their private scandals to some public target. Men become so burdened with scandals that they desperately, if unconsciously, seek the public substitutes upon whom to unburden themselves. As they become more numerous, the target’s attractiveness as a target increases, and the process becomes irresistible.

The notion of scandal bridges the gap between individual and collective violence. The mobility of scandals, their tendency to unite around a common victim, provides a mediation, a communication between the two levels.

The violent unanimity . . . results from a massive transference of scandals, a snowballing so powerful that its effects become inescapable. —René Girard, [The Girard Reader](#), ed. by James G. Williams (N.Y.: Crossroad, 1996) pp. 199-200. For an introduction to Girard see the Wikipedia article for [René Girard](#).