Thirty-First Sunday of the Year, B

St. Benedict Monastery, 2021

While It may seem counterintuitive

I always find the beloved feasts of the Church year

- Easter, Christmas, Pentecost and the like -

Some of the most challenging to preach.

That is not only because

I have preached those feasts with such regularity

That I am not sure I have anything fresh to say

But also because such feasts

Are planted so deeply in our religious imaginations

And carry so many memories and messages

Beyond the multitude of preachers

we have heard or endured in the liturgy

That being homiletically inventive

Attempting to splay open the underlying mysteries

In original or unexplored ways

Has the potential to engender resistance

in folk wishing to safeguard treasured beliefs

Deeply rooted in these festivals.

While the 31st Sunday in Ordinary time is not such a beloved feast

todays gospel from Mark

with its deep echoes in the 1st reading from Deuteronomy

is the textual equivalent of a high holyday:

the very core of Jesus’ teaching

the spiritual center of the Lord’s earthly ministry

and a succinct but powerful summary of the gospels.

As one of the most cited texts from the gospels

It has been preached

Taught

exegeted

Interpreted

And embraced by laity and leadership for two millennium.

So is there anything new to say?

I am reminded of the event

George Steiner relates in his book *Real Presences*

About the celebrated 19th century composer and pianist

Robert Schumann

Who after playing a difficult étude

Was asked by one of his hearers to explain the piece;

Schumann sat down and played it a second time.

Steiner then observes that

The most responsible act of musical interpretation

Is that of performance. [[1]](#footnote-1)

In that vein, should the preacher avoid blemishing

This crucial revelation

By abandoning the homiletic enterprise altogether,

Simply reading the passage a second time,

And then sitting down?

While that might be one solution to preaching this beloved text

Its lectionary appearance requires engagement.

My admittedly unconventional tactic for this engagement

comes from the game of billiards.

Now I am no billiards player,

Only having played pool many decades ago.

While the object of pool or pocket billiards

Is to sink various configurations of solid and striped balls

In the six pockets around the table’s circumference

Carom or French billiards is played on a table with no pockets

and only three balls.

One scores points in this game not by pocketing any balls,

but by driving one of the white balls

into both of the others in a single stroke.

This task is even more complex in 3-cushion billiards.

In this variation, the cue ball strikes one other ball

and then 3 or more cushions before striking the 2nd ball.

One wonders whether you need an advanced degree

in geometry to be successful in this sport.

The reason for my excursion into billiards

Is because of the design of our lectionary

Whose tripartite readings are analogous to 3 cushion billiards

In which the three pericopes richocet off each other,

in hopes that the Holy Spirit scores

And some life-giving message, even encounter ensues.

Ordinarily in playing billiards with God’s Word

I tend to employ the gospel as the metaphorical cue ball

And use it to move the other two readings

Around the homiletic arena.

Today, however, I’d like to take a shot at the Word

From the perspectives of the Letter to the Hebrews.

We’ve been reading this epistle as the second reading for a month.

In my experience preachers seldom venture into that text

a sometimes daunting theological treatise

About the priesthood of Christ

His Jesus’ exaltation through abasement

eclipsing Temple priesthood

and a long section on the eternal and salvific self-sacrifice

Jesus the high priest offered

for the salvation of the world.

Many of those themes are touched on in today’s 2nd reading

However, juxtaposing Hebrews with the great commandments

triggers a different image of Jesus’ enacted priesthood.

While it is not an explicit gospel description of him

Jesus can be rightly understood as embodying

This second great commandment

In the great reverence he practices towards others:

Whether fisherman or pharisee

Samaritan or sightless

pauper or possessed

Baptist cousin or random child

Jesus treated them with holy reverence

A powerful image of sacred deference

From the very incarnation of God

To its ongoing incarnation in every human being.

Barbara Brown Taylor is a favorite author

The second chapter of her book *An Altar in the World[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Is subtitled: *Reverence.*

Her detour into military references and guns

Was not what I expected: both disruptive and revelatory.

She writes: *I learned reverence from my father. For him it had nothing to do with religion and very little to do with God. I think it had something to do with him having been a soldier, since the exercise of reverence means knowing your rank in the overall scheme of things.*

Unexpectedly, she reflects how the ritual of cleaning a gun introduced her *to the practices that nourish reverence in a human life: paying attention, taking care, respecting things that can kill you, making the passage from fear to awe*.

She concludes this reflection by noting that practicing reverence is not an invitation to debate, it is about standing in silent awe: *Some of the most reverent people I know*, she writes, *decline to call themselves religious. For them, religion connotes …. [the ability] to hold your own in a debate with someone who believes otherwise … They do not want to debate anyone. The longer they stand before the holy of holies, the less adequate their formulations of faith seems to them.* She concludes: *Angels reach down and shut their mouths*.

There is little doubt that we live in a most contentious age

In which people loudly profess love of God,

but love of neighbor is increasingly less apparent.

To inject new meaning, even vitality into this crucial commandment

what if we replace the over-used language of “love”

With a vocabulary of reverence

Reimagining this second great commandment

Through a lexicon of awe and admiration

Practiced through devotion to the dignity of all.

What if we practice the royal priesthood

That 1 Peter [2:9] reminds us is our ecclesial birthright

By honoring the very sacramentality of the other

Participating deeply in the liturgy of the neighbor

As was Jesus’ constant practice

sometimes requiring that we simply welcome those angels

who gently shut our mouths.

Recently I viewed the Oscar Nominated film “Feeling Through”

A short but powerful tale of conversion

from selfishness to reverence.

A central character is Tereek, a homeless teen

Though apparently enjoying a late night with friends

He is also trying to find a place to sleep

Rather than spending one more night more on the street.

An older beggar approaches, but Tereek waves him off

because as he says “I got nothing.”

But then Tereek spots Artie, a deaf-dumb-blind man

Who needs help crossing a street and getting a bus.

Artie communicates by writing on a pad

And Tereek responds

By the quite intimate act of writing in Artie’s palm.

Though texted by his girlfriend that he can spend the night

Tereek realizes that Artie is too vulnerable to leave alone

And so he becomes his temporary guardian angel.

When Artie gets thirsty, they go to the store

Tereek buys him something to drink

But when paying for the drink

also takes $10 from Artie’s wallet for himself.

Because of this shopping excursion they miss the bus …

So Tereek is stuck even longer

ultimately missing his chance to stay with the girlfriend.

The two eventually fall asleep at the bus stop

Artie’s head on Tereek’s shoulder

A cinematic moment of silent communion …

When the bus does arrive

Tereek thorough invested in this mission

Not only gets Artie on the bus

But commissions the driver

To get Artie off the bus at the right stop.

In a penultimate moment

Artie gives Tareek a hug

And writes into his palm

“you’ll be ok.”

As the bus drives away

Tareek actually waves goodbye

A gesture of course not seen by Artie

But impelled by his newfound care

For a man he will probably never see again.

As he turns to go, Tareek sees the older beggar

Who had asked for money earlier in the night,

Now asleep on the street,

with that same empty paper cup in his grip.

Tareek carefully slips the stolen $10 into the cup

And walks away into the night.

Writing over 100 years ago, the Theologian Charles allen wrote that the innermost secret of Christianity is a distinctive type of reverence. He elaborates that it is “a reverence for the Eternal goodness who is ever seeking to save that which is lost … [It is] a self-reverence which aspires to the noblest ideals because each of us is a temple of a Holy Spirit who goodness we must ever more and more apprehend and emulate… [And it is] a reverence for the divine image in even the most degraded and for the possibilities of goodness there.” He concludes by characterizing such reverence as “enthusiastic philanthropy.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Philanthropy is literally the love of humankind.

In our baptism we were Chrismated

Into the philanthropy of Christ’s own priesthood:

the reverence that freed him to touch lepers and the dead

To confer discipleship on fisherman and Samaritan divorcees

And to welcome multitudes

Whether at a communal meal on a Galilean hillside

Or on golgatha, where he was nailed in a stance

Of eternal welcoming

Arms incapable of closing, even in death.

May this festal gospel

this irrevocable commandment

this most difficult mission of loving others

move us again: to care, to devotion, to unrelenting reverence

for friend and stranger through Christ our Lord.

1. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago), p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Charles Allen, “Reverence as the Heart of Christianity,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 4:2 (1911) 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)