

United Methodist Church

Elmore, Worcester

January 10, 2021

“God creates us, speaking words of love. He calls and claims his own that we may claim God’s beauty and glory in the world.”

Prelude, Gathering and Announcements

Moment of Silent Preparation

*Call to Worship (*One - All*)

One: God’s strong voice calls us to worship,

All: calling us to sing and offer praise.

One: God’s creative voice calls us to worship,

All: calling us to life and light.

One: God’s loving voice calls us to worship,

All: calling us to love and be loved.

One: Listen, for God’s voice calls us to now.

*Hymn of Praise

(open) *I Sing the Almighty Power of God* # 152 (UMH – *red*)

*Opening Prayer

Word of God, speak, for your servants are listening. (Pause in silent prayer.) Spirit of creation and renewal, hover over our gathering this day, as you hovered over creation on that first day. Enter into our hearts and our lives, as you did on the day of our baptism. Descend on us like a dove, as you did on Jesus’ day of baptism, that we may hear

again your words of love and adoption. Speak from the heavens into our minds, that we may perceive your words of guidance and wisdom.

*Gloria Patri # 71 (UMH)

Choir: *Softly and Tenderly* (Red 348)

Readings:

Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Young Disciples Talk and Prayer

*Hymn of the Reflection

Spirit Song # 347 (UMH – *red*)

Reflection

*Hymn of Response

Loving Spirit # 2123 (TFWS – *black*)

Joys, Concerns, & Thanksgiving

Offertory

Pastoral Prayer & Lord’s Prayer

Sending Hymn

Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee # 89 (UMH – *red*)

Benediction

Postlude

****Please remain seated.***

Reflection *(by Jake Owensby)*

Some years ago my friend Emile and I were driving back to Huntsville from a monthly clergy lunch in another part of northern Alabama. Emile had retired a decade or so earlier.

My colleagues and I admired and adored Emile as our wise and nurturing elder. And he seemed to know everybody in our part of the world. One of those people was a beekeeper who lived along our return route. At Emile's request, we stopped to buy some honey.

We pulled off the main road and traveled a short way up a dirt track until we arrived at a battered trailer sitting alone on a scrubby, red-clay lot. The door of the trailer swung wide and a tall, lanky man sprang down the steps and strode energetically toward us.

His long, thinning hair brushed his shoulders. An unruly beard tumbled to his chest. His broad smile revealed large gaps between his few remaining teeth.

We shook hands as Emile briefly introduced me to Jim. I smiled back thinking, "This is so Emile! Everybody sees him as one of us. Poor country folk and sophisticated professionals alike feel right at home with him."

Jim greeted me warmly and then turned to Emile. He said, "You know, I've been giving a lot of thought to what you told me about the Oxford Movement."

Um. What?!? Emile had been talking to this guy about sacramental theology, the relationship between Church and State, and the Incarnation?

This guy! With the thick Alabama accent, the poor grammar, the disheveled appearance.

This guy living in a dilapidated trailer in the middle of nowhere.

And that's when I realized that Emile was talking to this guy. Not the stereotype I carried around about people who look like him, talk like him and live where he lives.

Emile had gotten to know and care for Jim, not just a nameless example of the Southern rural demographic. In other words, Emile was living the message of Jesus.

The story of Jesus begins long before the manger. By starting the Gospel with the words "In the beginning," John invites us to understand Jesus from the perspective of creation. He aims to shape our grasp of God's love for us and to show us the path toward a new and radical depth in our love for one another.

John likely lumped into one what most scholars today consider two creation stories in the first two chapters of Genesis. So, when he alludes to the creation story he's likely including the bit about Adam and Eve.

There, we read that God formed Adam out of the dust, breathing life into what would have otherwise remained a mud pie. Crucially, God said, "Let there be Adam." Let there be this one, unique person.

God did not create a mold called "humanity" so that God could measure each individual's conformity to a single ideal. On the contrary, God said, "Let there be Jill. Let there be Jose. Let there be Salma." And Jill is Jill. Jose is Jose. Salma is Salma.

From God's perspective — from the perspective of perfect love — each of us is one of a kind. Unrepeatable. Irreplaceable. God calls us to this kind of love. To recognize, to respect, and to take joy in each person's unique beauty and goodness.

Loving at such depth is what it means to be created in the image of God. And if you're anything like me, you're still learning how to do that.

We give many people a passing glance. From habit or for convenience, sometimes from fear or prejudice, we react to our own shaky generalizations about groups instead of responding to the deep truth of a specific individual.

We see what we have come to assume about a liberal or a conservative. A gay person, a black male, or a country boy. Condescension, disrespect and even hatred become much easier when all we see is one of those people instead of a unique individual with a story all their own.

God doesn't deal with generalizations about people. God gets real. God savors this person's unmistakable scent and dances to the unique rhythm of this person's pulse.

God loves those bloodshot eyes, that crooked smile and that raspy voice. No two laughs, no two souls, no two hearts, no two life-stories are alike.

God loves real flesh and blood people. In all their sweetness and messiness.

That's what it means to say that God gets real. And the only way for us to love God is to get real with each other.

This essay originally appeared at [Looking for God in Messy Places](#). Reprinted with permission.

(Jake Owensby is the fourth Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Louisiana. Jake is the author of several books, including [Gospel Memories: The Future Can Rewrite Our Past](#) and [Connecting the Dots: A Hope-Inspired Life](#).

He and his wife Joy live in Alexandria, Louisiana. They have three adult children and a Lab mix named Gracie.)

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Pastoral Prayer

Thank you - Holy Spirit, we offer our prayers to you (...)

Lord Jesus, we give you thanks that you did not expect us to be faithful to you on our own. You do not leave us to our own devices. You give us what we need to be courageous, even when courage does not come naturally. You push us to speak up and speak out for you, even when we are reluctant to say what we think.

Bestow upon us your gift of Holy Spirit as we remember our baptism and give thanks. Stir up in us a fresh and immediate awareness of your Holy Spirit working in us and through us. Gift us with a bold sense of adventure in being willing to follow the leading of your Spirit who pushes and prods us out into this world. In your name we pray. Amen.

...we pray in the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as together we say, ***Our Father, who art in heaven... Amen***

Quotes

A life with God is a life in which the rhythms of silence and listening alternate with the rhythms of sharing and service. By praying with every part of who we are, we allow the grace that pours from the well of living water to trickle through all aspects of our being, nourishing and hydrating that which was parched and dis-eased. (*Creating a Life With God*, Daniel Wolpert; p. 159.)

God waits for us and for the ripening of our spirits to enter into this inheritance. The liturgy is there like Jacob sleeping and dreaming. When he awoke, he recognized that “this is the gate of heaven.” [Gen. 28:16-17] The Spirit of God works in this patterned action with words and holy things. God waits for us week in and week out in the here-and-now gatherings of the people around tangible items like water, bread, wine, oil, touch, the play of light, and the arrangement of space hallowed by prayer. (*Patterned by Grace*, Daniel T. Benedict; p. 24.)

The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer. Perhaps you have never prayed before except in anguish or terror. It may be that the only time the Divine Name has been on your lips has been in angry expletives. Never mind. I am here to tell you that the Father’s heart is open wide – you are welcome to come in. (*Prayer*, Foster; p. 2.)

Creating Worlds with Words

Hitler did not come to power with tanks and guns. He came to power with words.

Once an idea takes root in your mind it cannot be undone. There is no unlearning. There is only relearning.

Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that “words create worlds.” They are not mere metaphors and images on a page. They are the archive of ideas, the power to transform the world by transforming the people who call this world home.

Words are an event to be encountered, the mediation of experiential ideology. Rather than listening to a lecture we ought to be wandering around the world these words create.

What kind of world are your words creating?

(Jim Keat, “Words Create Worlds,” *Thirty Seconds or Less*, February 28, 2014, <http://thirtysecondsorless.net/words>.)

The Alphabet of Humdrum Events

I am thinking of incarnation, breath becoming speech through teeth and tongue, spirit becoming word, silence becoming prayer, the holy dream becoming the holy face. I am speaking of the humdrum events of our lives as an alphabet.

I am thinking of grace. I am thinking of the power beyond all power, the power that holds all things in manifestation, and I am thinking of this power as ultimately a Christ-making power, which is to say a power that makes Christs, which is to say a power that

works through the drab and hubbub of our lives to make Christs of us before we're done or else, for our sakes, graciously to destroy us. In neither case, needless to say, is the process to be thought of as painless.

(Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace* (Harper One, 1989), 11.)

Roasting the Carver

There's an old story about a man named Harry who was hosting a dinner party. One of his guests was a surgeon.

As he was carving the roast, Harry kept up a running commentary directed at his friend. "How am I doing, Doc? How do you like my technique? I'd make a pretty good surgeon, don't you think?"

After he was done, Harry proudly set the platter with the slices of meat in front of his guest. With a twinkle in his eye, the surgeon looked up at his prideful friend and said quietly, "Anybody can take them apart, Harry. Now let's see you put them back together again."

The same is true of the words we utter. It's a lot easier to use them to tear people apart than to put them back together.

A Healthy Religion

I hold my Protestant faith responsible for white supremacy, anti-Semitism, racism, and genocide against indigenous peoples. This isn't what Jesus taught. How did my religion become the fountainhead of evil?

It didn't, because it isn't. Genocide, slavery, supremacy, and suppression of the "other" is common to almost every religion. This is because religions are often more concerned with their self-preservation than with people's Self-realization. Self-preservation demands a zero-sum worldview of "us against them" while Self-realization cultivates a non-zero world view of "all of us together." If your religion is about self-preservation rather than Self-realization you might consider finding a healthier religion.

Spirituality and Health, January/February, 2021; *Religion and Politics*, by Rabbi Rami Shapiro.

We are using “Face Book Live” in Elmore worship, in an effort to keep in touch with folks who are at home during this time of increased Covid-19 activity. What is shared herein will be different than what is being preached today from the pulpit. Just so that you are aware, we are working out the details of what is permitted on the web and on line so as not to violate any copyright laws, give credit where credit is due and acknowledge appropriately. Thank you for your patience and understanding during this time of fluid social pandemic unrest. May the peace of Christ reign in your heart and surround your family with love, compassion, grace and good health as we enter Advent – the coming of our Lord, Jesus. *Pastor David*

***Offertory** Throughout this Covid-19 pandemic, we wish to acknowledge your financial support. Thank you for your continued contributions. Your gifts – tithes and offerings, allow the Elmore and Worcester United Methodist Churches to continue ministries to and with our neighbors. We appreciate your continued support and prayers. Send contributions to:*

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Thank you. *Your Finance Team*

Pastoral Message: (...)

(...will be different than what is presented herein. This Sunday's message can be heard in person at the 8:30 and 10:30 Sunday service in Elmore and Worcester respectively. Thank you for your patience, understanding and care during these challenging times. Be well and may God bless you.)

BENEDICTION:

(Romans 16:25-27) Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith – to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.