

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary time

September 26, 2010

Amos 6:1a, 4-7	Woe to the complacent
Psalms 146:7-10	Justice for the oppressed
1 Timothy 6:11-16	Pursue righteousness
Luke 16:19-31	Lazarus and a rich man

Two of the readings for today greet me like old friends.

For years I've used the passage from Amos and Luke's parable as set pieces to illustrate certain formal features of biblical writing.

The text from Amos has always been a great illustration of the possibilities of Hebrew poetry.

In a crescendo of neatly parallel lines,
 enumerating the examples of decadence to be found
 among the leading classes of Israel,
 he builds to a single antithetical accusation,
 in which the whole imaginative picture comes crashing down.
 "Yet they are not made ill by the collapse of Joseph!"

(I could do this better with a PowerPoint presentation.)

"Joseph," I should point out, is not a person named Joseph, but rather an entire people.

Amos is prophesying in the territory
 of the tribe of the patriarchal ancestor, Joseph.
 This is the prophet's shorthand way of talking about them.

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus has for years provided me with a handy example of the influence of oral tradition on Gospel stories.

It is a rule with stories passed down orally
 that there be no more than two characters to a scene,
 since neither storyteller nor listener could deal with
 the complicated interchanges of three or more characters.

In the parable, after we hear about Lazarus and the rich man, Abraham enters the story, and so Lazarus has to sit the rest of the time out.

The explanation is that this story went through an oral stage, before Luke happened to write it down.

I'm mentioning these things not simply to get them out of the way so I can settle down and talk about something else,

but also because these very features
 point to the lessons of the passages.

Amos has directed his complaint

against the leading classes of Israelite society.
 This is not so clear in our liturgical selection,
 which leaves out the part that specifies
 the prophet's target population.

The point in building up the varieties of luxurious living,
 only to be undercut by the scathing charge
 concerning their unconcern for Joseph, their people,
 is to demonstrate their lack of social responsibility.
 Not only are they hoarding the nation's wealth for themselves,
 but also they show no concern for the suffering
 of those supposedly in their care.
 In fact, the goods that should be devoted
 to the welfare of the people
 are exactly what they are so conspicuously consuming.

In Luke's parable, the first part tells us
 about the contrasting situations of the Rich Man and poor Lazarus.
 This much sounds like a typical Oriental tale of reversed fortunes.
 But when Abraham enters the picture, things get down to business,
 and we understand that the pertinent issue, as with the Amos passage,
 is complacency, lack of concern.
 The strong suggestion, though this is never explicitly said,
 is that the rich man passed by Lazarus daily,
 without being moved to help.
 And this is the reason he is suffering,
 and this is what would have changed if he had repented.

In other words, these stories both speak about
 social claims made upon members of a society,
 especially upon those who benefit most.
 To be clear, this claim says the social concern is an obligation,
 not a matter of choice.
 It is a matter of justice, not charity.
 The leaders of Israel, in Amos's indictment, not only rob the poor,
 they violate their role as guardians of the people.
 The rich man not only profited better than Lazarus,
 he also ignored him.

In the social world in which we live today
 there is a movement away from acknowledging such social claims.
 It is part of the air we breathe, and it can affect us
 without our paying attention to it.
 Especially in a time of recession and joblessness,
 while some people show remarkable generosity,
 many others are frightened,

and tempted to adopt mean-spirited positions.
 Fear of immigrants, caricatures of Islam,
 the current rise of libertarian movements,
 such as the Tea Party movement,
 all would seem pointers in that direction.

When I hear statements that equate little or no taxation
 with good American citizenship,

I wonder what obligation citizens are supposed to bear.

When I hear TV faces talk about
 what Congress is doing with your money,

I understand that oversight is a necessary task in a democracy.

But I also hear the implication that it is my money
 and no government has the right to take it.

In other words, it would appear they are saying
 that society makes no claim upon me.

I am a lone ranger and community of one.

Recent proposals include eliminating social security,
 getting rid of Medicare, and repealing the new Health Care law.

One re-description of the theory of justice
 as a libertarian “entitlement theory” (by Robert Nozick)

“guarantees absolute property rights
 and unregulated economic liberties
 within an ‘ultra-minimal state’

that provides no public goods or services, or benefits
 for the disabled or destitute.” (NYRB, 10/14/10, 58)

But against absolute property rights,
 we have a mandate of stewardship,
 which implies that the goods of the earth are on loan,
 and the human community makes a claim
 upon my rights of possession.

And against repeal of social programs
 in the name of an ultra-minimal state,
 we have an understanding of social justice
 based on each person’s value as made in the image of God
 —where the human family makes a claim in justice
 upon me as a brother or sister.

One can only imagine what it would be like
 if the prophet Amos made an appearance on Fox News.
 Or if Abraham, as he is shown in Luke’s parable,
 was given an opportunity to address the US Congress.
 And they might have a word for you and me, as well.

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 3, 2010

Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4	The just by faith will live
Psalms 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9	If today you hear his voice
2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14	Your share of hardship
Luke 17:5-10	Faith like a mustard seed

St. Paul is hanging around the edges of today's liturgical readings. The one place you might expect him, in the second reading attributed to him, is the place you probably will not find him. Critics almost universally attribute the pastoral letters of Timothy and Titus to later followers, applying certain principles to later developments in the church.

But the other readings rather surprisingly hint at his presence. The book of Habakkuk only appears here in the three-year cycle of readings. It is probably included because of the last line in the reading: *"the just one, because of faith, will live."*

That line is the only part of this book that appears in the New Testament, where it is quoted twice: once in the letter to the Romans, and once in Galatians. The two appearances are parallel in their purpose. It is in these two letters that Paul elaborates his notion of salvation by faith, rather than by law. In both letters, he uses Habakkuk 2:4 as his key scripture text in support of the idea.

My conclusion is this: if Habakkuk is quoted only here, we are invited to pay attention to how his text is used in the Christian tradition, as shown by Paul.

In the Gospel, Luke comes surprisingly close to Paul's thought in today's selection. The theme of faith is announced at the start: If you had faith the size of a mustard seed you could tell this mulberry tree to uproot and plant itself in the sea, and it would do so.

And then we come to the rather strange reading, to our ears, of the example of the servant who, upon coming in from the fields, must first serve his master's meal before enjoying his own. It seems rather undemocratic to us.

It is clearly from another time and place.
The point, however, has to do with discipleship and faith.

Discipleship is not to be considered something
by which we gain advantage. It is not building credit.
It is simply living out the life of a disciple, nothing more.
What benefits derive from it are not calculated in.

The issue here is the nature of faith
—and our relation to an infinite, transcendent God.

Recent writings about Paul,
such as Pamela Eisenbaum's new book, *Paul Was Not a Christian*,
try to correct certain excesses
in traditional Christian theology about the Apostle.
Eisenbaum is a Jewish NT scholar
teaching in a Christian theological school,
and as such she brings a unique perspective to the writings of Paul.
What she is saying by the provocative title of her book
is that Paul was self-consciously Jewish, as he repeatedly insists,
and Christianity hadn't properly begun yet when he was writing.

One point she makes is that the typically Lutheran emphasis
on salvation by faith as opposed to salvation by works,
that is, by human effort, is not fair to Judaism:

“According to this view, Christianity correctly recognizes
the inevitable failure of human beings to achieve righteousness
and thus the necessity of accepting God's grace
—in the form of Jesus Christ—
while Judaism mistakenly puts its faith
in the ability of human beings to achieve salvation
through their own efforts.” (p. 2)

But Jews do not believe this.

Perhaps it would be more appropriate
to see the contrast presented as between Christian and Jew
as actually descriptive of another dichotomy entirely
—that between Luther and the Catholic Church.
For as a matter of fact we Catholics do tend to lean toward thinking
that human works can accomplish salvation.

If Lutherans can use a bit of a corrective
concerning the role of human effort in the economy of salvation,
I think that Catholics can benefit

from a new appreciation of salvation by faith.

But here the conversation has shifted to a theme that is more familiar to us under the heading of Grace. Grace is a name for a divine gift from a generous God. Grace is something unearned, even as we insist we can cooperate with it. Granted that, but we must remember first of all and above all, it is unearned.

Why should we be concerned?
Here are some ways in which it makes a difference.

First of all, it changes how we think about God's love for us. A theology of works, to use that term, emphasizes performance. God's love becomes something that hangs on our deserving it. We might compare this to a father's love as compared to a mother's love—to indulge in some rank stereotypes here.

If the former seems to place conditions on how love is to be earned, the latter is just unconditional. If our stereotypical father demands certain benchmarks of behavior if his approval is to be won, our generic example of mother love requires nothing like this. Love is not earned; it is freely and lavishly given.

Paul seems to suggest that God's love is more like a mother's love, in that it is there before any deserving action on our part. It does not keep a ledger and it anticipates any question or need that might arise. God loves us, despite our occasional feeling that we are not lovable, and probably not loved.

A second way in which it makes a difference is that a theology of works tends to take too much credit for our failures as well as our successes. A classic way that this has been expressed is in the sin and syndrome of scrupulosity. We might remember that all too vividly.

This is an affliction of the seriously religious. It presupposes that everything hangs on what I do, and in what manner I do it. In other words, it makes the assumption that salvation is a matter of works, not grace.

In fact, confronted by the insistence that salvation is by grace,
 it may be offended,
 and protest that relying on grace is too easy, too slack.
 It may protest that those who point to grace
 are not sufficiently serious about their religion.
 What they mean is they are not grim enough,
 for being serious seems to them grim stuff.
 In fact, the sin of scrupulosity is akin to the sin of pride,
 in that it claims too much for oneself.

The difference between the two outlooks can be described
 as that between the calculation and the gift.
 The spirit of calculation seeks certainty,
 which it wants to achieve by a strict accounting
 that is akin to mathematics.
 It is an approach that would remove everything that is hazy and fluid.
 As such, it stands far away from the art of personal relations,
 where success is achieved through intuitions,
 concessions, and negotiations.
 In calculation there is little room for the generous move.

The spirit of the gift is prodigal and profuse.
 Instead of demanding an account,
 it primes the pump with a generous donation.
 It spends itself without calling for recompense,
 and when a fine return in fortune arrives,
 as it sometimes does, though without a guarantee,
 it is felt as a blessing, an unexpected, uncalled-for benefice.

We relate to our God in a spirit of gift.
 Not only are we in no position to make demands,
 but such a move is decidedly unnecessary.
 Whenever we discover our needs, God has already been there,
 the forms filled out, the goods gathered and packaged,
 waiting only for our signature on the dotted line to accept it.

We recite often enough the phrase that God is Love.
 Faith life is living in confident trust of its truth.

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 10, 2010

2 Kings 5:14-17 Naaman, a leper
 Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4 He has revealed his justice
 2 Timothy 2:8-13 The Word is not chained
 Luke 17:11-19 Ten Lepers:

Yesterday I was reading about the mood in this year's election cycle.
 Words that are said to name the American spirit are "freedom" and "liberty."
 Words that are avoided as not so American are these,
 according to the author of the article:
 "community," "compassion," and "justice."

Needless to say, I was disappointed.
 Since I think those are precisely the words that should characterize America.
 In any case, they are exactly the words that underlie
 what I see happening in the readings for today.

Clearly today lepers are featured.
 But what begins with lepers moves outward to larger questions.
 The stories move from leprosy to gratitude,
 and from gratitude to praise.

First the lepers.
 We tend to sympathize with the lepers in the Bible.
 Those we meet today are Naaman, the Syrian war commander,
 and ten nameless lepers of Jesus' time,
 with one Samaritan in particular getting top billing.

The lot of the leper in ancient times was not a pleasant one.
 The disease itself wasn't so bad. It was the remedy that hurt.
 Eviction from the settlements was the legal standard. Ostracizing.

The ten lepers roamed the countryside without a fixed domicile.
 What the TH in the police beat calls "no permanent address."

In the case of Naaman, this wasn't not so bad,
 since he was a person of considerable standing in Damascus,
 and could to some extent control his circumstances.
 Still, it is clear that he very much desired to have his condition changed.

As for the ten, they were outsiders of a classic type.
 It must be understood that the remedy
 of banishing the leper from the settlement
 was not done for the good of the leper.
 It was done to preserve the community from the leprosy that the leper carried.
 In fact, modern science has shown that the leprosy of the bible
 was not the pernicious modern disease we call leprosy,
 but something much milder, though possibly difficult to treat.
 But the main concern was to preserve the group
 from the pollution represented by the leper.

In fact, it would seem that lepers were needed in order to demonstrate that the community was clean and working toward greater cleanliness. The banished leper illustrated to all that measures were being taken to preserve the safety of the group. They needed lepers in order to make the demonstration.

Lepers were the original outsiders. **But today's lepers** are doubly outsiders. Naaman was not an Israelite, but a Syrian, from Damascus. An enemy, and a commander of the enemy forces.

Consequently, when he came to Israel looking for a cure, he was properly greeted with the deepest suspicion. He had to work to overcome the barriers.

And the tenth leper of the gospel, the one who returned to thank Jesus, also was not an Israelite, but rather a Samaritan. Samaritans were distrusted, if not despised, by Judeans. So he too was doubly an outsider, doubly an alien.

Aliens, or strangers in the land, are listed in the bible among the archetypal victims of society, along with the widow and orphan and the poor neighbor. They are the vulnerable, the defenseless that must be given special consideration under the terms of the covenant.

So when we are thinking about the healing of the lepers, we are thinking not only about lepers but also about the communities that banished them. The healing that takes place concerns the community as much as the individuals whose disease is remedied.

In returning the lepers to their communities, Jesus is repairing a rift in the group, and bringing healing to the general population. It is an image of his mission in general, come to save and restore us to our lives and redeem heal our communities.

But the lepers we are regarding today are not only foreigners, they also are examples of gratitude. Both readings make this clear.

The story of Naaman, which is rather lengthy, is trimmed to size for today's consideration.

What we hear is only the end of the story,
 the part where Naaman tries to thank the prophet.
 Rebuffed on his attempt to thank the prophet by a gift in return,
 he takes what the reading calls a "mule-load" of Israelite dirt
 back to Damascus with him.
 (I think the term "mule-load" is constructed on the analogy of truckload.
 In any case, it is a rather strange term.)

Along with Naaman's strenuous efforts at expressing his gratitude,
 we have the story of the Samaritan, plus nine others.
 Here too gratitude is a featured part of the story.
 In fact, of the nine verses in the narrative, over half (i.e., 5)
 are devoted to the part about giving thanks.

In fact, the way the story is constructed,
 with the cure happening only after the ten leave Jesus,
 the cure sets up the thanksgiving,
 since the one who was grateful had to demonstrate his gratitude
 by finding his way back to Jesus.

So a second thing we are invited to think about,
 in addition to healing the communities,
 is the role of thanksgiving as completing the healing of the leper
 and the repair of the divided group.

The point made by the emphasis on gratitude
 is that the healing, which consists of rejoining the community,
 is answered by the thanksgiving, which itself has a social function.

Expressing gratitude is a socializing move
 because it makes a point of recognizing one's dependence on another.
 It admits interdependence, as well as dependence.
 It makes what might have been a one-sided transaction
 mutual in its expression. In the mutuality
 it expresses the interactive and interpersonal nature of community.

Relationships go both ways.

On a more personal level, it marks the leper's re-entry into society
 by allowing him to make a social gesture.
 In a sense, only the Samaritan is healed fully.
 The Samaritan alone of the ten has understood
 that the gift of community that he has now received
 deserves and requires a reciprocal recognition.
 Only the Samaritan completes the gesture.

But there is more to these stories.

Not only do we have two stories about lepers.
 And not only are the lepers foreigners, outsiders.
 And not even the fact that both are examples of gratitude tells it all.
 But there is more.

In each of these cases, the gratitude takes the form of praising God.
 In both of the stories we move beyond leprosy and gratitude to praise.
 Praise of God, that is.

In the case of Naaman, we have the "mule-load" of dirt.
 This was intended to set up a shrine in the city of Damascus,
 so that YHWH God could be praised there as well.
 The change in Naaman's life dictated, for him,
 a permanent shrine that would allow continuous thanksgiving.
 Ongoing thanksgiving, in fact,
 would seem to be the purpose of the shrine.

In the case of the Samaritan healed by Jesus,
 we have him returning to praise God.
 The actual language is this: "he returned glorifying God"
 (and later:) "returned give thanks to God."

The first is from the narrator and the second is Jesus' own question.
 I think it is safe to call these versions of Praise.

What is striking about the story is that
 while the Samaritan returns to thank Jesus,
 his thanksgiving takes the form of praising God.

What does this add to what we have already seen?
 It does take it into the religious dimension,
 beyond the simple matter of social interaction.
 Or even the recognition of the importance of community.

Let's say this. Whereas the leprosy and the gratitude
 relate to the healing of the community,
 the praise puts the action into a larger context.
 Now we understand it as part of a faith story.
 In effect, we are tracing the healing back to its source.
 The grateful healed lepers understand that everything
 traces back to a God who creates and sustains the world,
 who wants them to be healthy and whole.

There are at least two parts to this.
 On the one hand, healing as part of a larger process

of creation and providence.

On the other hand, we have an image of God as one who heals.

Which is to say, the holy is connected with that.

We find that Jesus considers compassion to be the essence of holiness.

Which brings me back to my opening statements.

If today "community, compassion, and justice" are not the favored names for what it means to be an American, we can at least understand these are the Gospel's favored terms for describing the faithful Christian.

And it is the task of faithful Christians to extend compassion, support and instruct in community, proclaim and administer the terms of justice, and defend those whom society would ignore and banish.

It is up to the Christian community to be advocate for those who might otherwise be lost.

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 17, 2010

Exodus 17:8-13	Moses and Amalek
Psalms 121:1-8	Our help is in the Lord
2 Timothy 3:14—4:2	Scripture is inspired
Luke 18:18	A Persistent Widow

If you've read any Yiddish stories or Hasidic tales, you know that Jewish storytelling often has a certain sly humor. And that sad matters are often treated humorously and funny matters with a deep sadness.

I have this theory that this is true of many of the Jewish stories in the Bible, but we are so busy taking them seriously that we miss the humor.

Take, for instance, today's story from Exodus featuring Moses and the Amalekites, with walk-on parts for Aaron, Hur and Joshua.

Commentators will tell you that this image of the prophet required to keep his hands in the air in a posture of supplication if the war is to be won is a mark of a primitive mentality. Perhaps it is.

But I prefer to think of it as the mark
of a sophisticated sense of humor elaborating on an early belief.
After all, although the bible contains many very early materials,
it was compiled at a later day, by experienced scribes.
And that Jewish tradition of wry humor had to come from somewhere.

So Moses and the Israel encounters Amalek.
Hands up, we are winning; hands down, we are losing.
And so let us have a couple of sidemen hold up the arms.
We have seen the scene before, on the Cartoon channel.

But this isn't the only story today that carries a subversive humor.
The story of the widow and the judge also qualifies.
We have to remember that the widow is the image and poster child
of the vulnerable and marginal Israelite.
Abusing the widow and orphan was the very depth of social depravity.
But this widow doesn't seem all that defenseless.

And the judge represented the rule of justice in the land.
You will remember that Amos especially blasted
the judges who sold their decisions to the highest bidders.

If the judges were bought and sold, where was justice to be found?
In his view, this meant that the fabric of society
was coming unravelled.
And this judge is identified as being corrupt.
Certainly a helpless, indigent widow cannot meet his prices.

What gives it all away for me is the judge's line
explaining his surrender to her wishes.
He is afraid she will do him violence.
Our translation says he is worried that she strike him.
The word literally means to give one a black eye.

Some suggest this is to be read figuratively.
It is true that we use the phrase that way.
To receive a black eye can mean to take a hit to your reputation.
Other translations choose to have the judge say
that she will wear him down.
In any case, it is rather ludicrous for the judge to fear the widow.
It's major role reversal.

It also suggests that Jesus appreciates women
who make their case rather assertively.
In other places he calls this kind of assertion *faith*.

In fact, something like that is happening here,
 since her persistence is being likened to prayer.
 Even those who have no apparent advantages in a struggle
 are not entirely helpless, since they have prayer.

Actually, this is part of the Moses story as well.
 Moses and the Israelites are a disorganized lot,
 a band of former slaves without much in the way of weaponry,
 without a nation or state, without a standing army.
 And they are wandering across hostile territories
 in which the king and his military do not welcome them.

The Israelites are hopelessly overmatched.
 And yet, when Moses beseeches God for help
 against the current opponent, Amalek, they actually prevail.
 Here too persistence counts.

On the face of it, persistence seems a strange thing to recommend.
 One can understand teaching people they should pray.
 That would be a normal recommendation of spiritual guidance.
 And we know that Jesus has said: Ask and it will be granted.

But to make much of persistence in prayer
 seems to admit that the asking isn't always answered.
 Sometimes results are frustratingly absent from the receiving list.
 Are we being asked to keep asking,
 and then eventually we will receive?
 If we wait long enough everything will come around?

There is more to it than that, I believe.
 In persistent prayer we find out
 what we really are determined about,
 what we are passionate about.
 What we know we really need.
 Things that are not that crucial
 eventually get dropped off the prayer list.
 They seemed like a good idea at the time,
 and maybe we felt that we could not exist without them.
 But after awhile we discover that they are not that important after all.

Other intentions, however, never go away.
 Our need for them is too strong, it never leaves us.
 It can be health for a dear friend.
 It might be a turning point in one's life,
 which has till now been on a downhill slide.

It might be a desperate financial situation,
or one of the other ways that modern life can make us desperate.

But in persistent prayer, when the prayer continues
despite the lack of answer, we are confirmed in understanding
that this is an important, even crucial, matter in our life.
And we have the record of persistence to prove it.

When I was writing about this Sunday for the *Witness* column,
I tacked on an example at the end.
I am afraid I did not connect it to the point clearly enough.
I was thinking about the Internet Age,
and how universal information is at our fingertips.
One result, I think, is that we are growing more impatient,
unable to wait upon events.

Another result, and this is what I was getting at,
is that when we always get immediate results,
we never have to distinguish between what is essential and what is not.
It is all essential, we think, and we get impatient if we have to wait.
(Which Mediacom had us do three times last week.)

Imagine if prayer was like the Internet.
Whatever we prayed for, there it was on our doorstep,
almost immediately. What would that do to us?
What if every prayerful wish came true?
How long would it take for us to lose any semblance of perspective?

That was a negative example.
This week we have been witness
to a remarkable positive example of persistence as well.
After 69 days the 33 Chilean miners were brought to the surface,
having been buried a half mile down in the earth for that duration.
What astounded people was their good health.
Also, the fact they were all clean shaven.

We had imagined the worse.
We had imagined the destructive toll that burial and despair
would take on them, individually, and as a group.
We imagined the struggle, the mutual recriminations, competitions.

And here there was none of that.
Certainly much of it was due to tremendous leadership.
But behind it all was prayer and persistence.
They never gave up, though the ordeal dragged on and on.

And then, despite all reason, there they were above ground,
healthy and united.

Their survival depended on a combination of prayer and effort.
But that is what we see in the other stories we heard today as well.

Wedding Homily: Eric and Brenna Anglada

Jeremiah 29: 4-6, 11-14 Letter to the Exiles
Romans 12: 2, 10-21 Be not conformed
Matthew 5:1-12 Beatitudes

Their city gone now, their temple gone,
the inhabitants of Jerusalem were being rounded up
for deportation to Babylon. Their victors had them captive.

Jeremiah is writing them a letter.

Despite his warnings they had resisted to the bitter end,
and now he sends some advice for their life in exile.

**Build houses and live in them;
plant gardens and eat what they produce.**

Marry and have children.

Settle down in the land to which the Lord is sending you.

For you are given a mission and task,

to be present in the land to which you are being sent,

as a witness to something other than the usual expectations.

You are to be a witness to the existence of a God

who is beyond proving himself with displays of force and ferocity.

For Paul, the Christian community was in exile amid an alien world.

Paul knew that Jesus came into a world that needed him.

For what other reason would he have come?

Paul saw the larger society as under the mark of disintegration,
a dysfunctional human family.

But with Jesus of Nazareth a breath of new possibility
had entered the world. Paul called it Spirit.

It had invaded the world in the form of Christian communities,
in which the freedom to live in mutual love and encouragement
had become a reality.

The only worry was how to keep the communities viable,
living up to the promise in which they were established.

Paul wrote a lot of letters in the work of
keeping those communities living and breathing,
living up to the promise of their founding.

In the letter to the Romans he detailed
some of the marks of the freedom community.

You heard them:

**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.
Live in harmony with one another;
do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;
do not claim to be wiser than you are.
Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.**

**Do not repay anyone evil for evil,
Love one another with mutual affection;
Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.
Contribute to the needs of the saints;
extend hospitality to strangers.**

In Matthew's account of the Beatitudes, we hear another list,
as Jesus lays out a manifesto for his disciples.
Here too we hear an agenda for the community of disciples.
Poverty of spirit, mercy, peacemaking, a passion for justice.
These mark the community of the Messiah.

Here too we find a community in virtual exile,
sent to live among the colonies of the empire,
to dramatize a countervailing possibility
to the values and manners of the empire.
Matthew lived in a world that had just known
the second destruction of Jerusalem and its second temple.
Rome's demolition of the Holy City and the Holy Place
was a theological statement intended to discredit and embarrass
the claims of the God of the Bible.
If your God is God of the known world, God of the universe,
why is it that we Romans can push him around so easily?
We think he is an illusion, a chimera of your troubled history.
We, the empire, are the only and obvious truth.

But the Beatitudes say otherwise.
And the disciples are invited to testify with their lives
that this "otherwise" is true.

Eric and Brenna have chosen to live their lives
in the manner spelled out by Jeremiah and Paul,
by Jesus in his Beatitudes.
In committing themselves to one another,

they make a mutual pledge to live in the manner
of the exile amid an alien frame,
a world of confused and unhelpful values.

The ceremony that they have chosen conveys as much.
Simplicity, not display, is the guiding theme,
and in it we still discover a display, one of alternative values.
Alternative, that is, to a culture
that prefers its experiences ready-made, pre-packaged,
energy-intensive, automated, homogenized, and seductively marketed.
Authenticity is never so flashy as the Mad Men can make it.
But it does have its compensations.

Brenna and Eric have chosen not to shop the Mall for rings.
There is only one ring in this ceremony:
that of Brenna's mother's mother.
Family history, not commerce, is its meaning.

In a spirit of questioning the dominant culture,
this ceremony has been separated
from the civil act of entering a state-sponsored, legal marriage.
Having performed the legal act of marriage some time ago,
Brenna and Eric have focused on this sacramental exchange of vows
as the site of their real marriage.
In their words, it is a covenant, and more than a civil contract.

In their words:
“we understand our community to be those
with whom we have actual relationships
—our families, our neighbors, our friends,
and the larger Church, the Body of Christ.
It is from the members of these communities
that we wish to seek a blessing and acceptance of our union before God,
our decision to enter into a partnership for life.”

Our union before God...
Consider this: A church, like this one, is a silent place.
I could pause and let us listen to the silence.
Some would interpret the silence as emptiness,
a vacuum which tells us that God is an illusion and a dream.

But there is another way to hear that silence,
akin to the cosmic white noise of radiation
that is the lingering hum of that original Big Bang

that launched the known universe.
That is, we might sense the presence of the creator God
who not only launched creation, but also sustains it
with this creative presence that fills
what might otherwise be thought to be silence.

It is in the orbit of this presence that this couple
enters into a mutual covenant.

Eric and Brenna, this covenant into which you are entering
is a commitment to one another, and it is more:
It is testimony to the possibility of commitment
in a time grown uneasy about making long-term dedications,
binding covenants.

In your pledge is the reassurance of the possibility
of permanent promises.
That is your gift to each other and to us.

And with that, we honor your coming together.
We bless it, and we celebrate it.