

Sermon: Year C, IV Lent
Texts: Joshua 4:19-24, 5:9-12
II Corinthians 5:17-21
Luke 15:11-32

Throughout his career, Robert Shaw, the great American choral conductor, was fond of writing notes to his choirs. They usually weren't tokens of affection. They were, rather, more than likely, remarks that gauged the distance between what he felt the music itself promised and required and what the men and women of his choir had, in fact, contributed toward this in their efforts during rehearsals.

Shaw had high expectations. When he was just 26 years old, he formed the Collegiate Choir in New York City, and every member of the choir, when he or she joined, was given a Creed that consisted of seven major statements that laid out the purpose of the choir. Shaw was emphatic: making music wasn't just a hobby or a pleasant diversion from the common tasks of the week. His very first declaration was typically bold. "We believe," he wrote, "that in a world of political, economic, and personal disintegrations, *music is not a luxury but a necessity* – not simply because it is 'therapeutic'; nor because it is a 'universal language.' [It's a necessity]" he stated, "because it is the persistent focus of [humankind's] intelligence, aspiration, and good will." That's no small thing. Put in other words, he claimed that music reminds us of and resets us within the "life we have lost in living – the wisdom we have lost in knowledge – and the knowledge we have lost in information." As such, and in every moment, then, Shaw contended, music deserves our acute attentions.

More than twenty years after first establishing this creed, after one more in a long line of weekly choir rehearsals, Shaw, in a bit of pique, penned a five part letter to his choir, this time marking at length many of the rhythmic flaws that he felt needed immediate correction. If they were to achieve the kind of art worthy of the name, he prodded them, they would have to amend many habits, both things done and those things left undone. At the end of a long list of instructions, he concluded with this memorable summary. "I'd like to be able to tell you," he said, "all that I feel about Rhythm and the Time-ness of music, and make it sound fresh and exciting. [But] as a matter of fact, I've written to you so many times about it that I'm sick and tired of the whole subject." To which he added the withering exclamation, "It all sounds like *slogans*."

"Yet," he finished, "I *know* it's right. And I know [that rhythm's] the one absolutely necessary, basic, urgency of the choral art... I'm not tired of doing it," he wrote, [I'm] "only tired of talking about it.

Shaw's comment is insightful. All too many of our highest aspirations fall, easily, to mere slogans, words that sound good but have no strength because they have no correlate in the flesh or in action. Casual laziness slips in. We are lulled to sleep, making assumptions, at ease in our inattentiveness. Our finest expressions become hollow incitements, linguistic cotton candy – fine sugar whipped up into a brilliant colored bouquet, that, subsequently, melts to nothing when ingested. The inherent danger of trying to talk about what is most beautiful or good or holy is that the hard work of digging into the soul to uncover what is most central risks becoming, instead, no more than the indiscriminate throwing around of terms that are impressive but have no real attachment to us. We nod in agreement to grand words, but fail to translate them into the minute details of discipline, and then practice, and then performance, and, at last, transformation.

I've sung in enough choirs to know this: everyone agrees that rhythm is essential. But very few of us take up the task with greater intentions than just getting by. The resulting music can be pleasant, but, by huge lengths, it misses the mark of being what it could be – that

crystalline focus of human capabilities that, as Robert Shaw so hoped, can counter and heal our many worldly disintegrations.

I thought of Shaw's words this week in light of the words of Saint Paul we have heard this morning from his second letter to the Corinthians. For Paul is struggling with the same problem – wanting desperately to articulate what lies deepest, this time in the heart of God. Yet he is also aware that these very things, once revealed, tend to become mere words, clichés, slogans oft repeated but rarely plumbed, possibilities left stranded in talk, which, although spoken of from time to time, ultimately remain idle. They are intended to be terms that, finally, change us intrinsically and visibly, but repeatedly, we let them slip by, unattended.

In the space of one sentence, Paul uses the word reconciliation four times. “Christ has reconciled us to himself and has given us the ministry of reconciliation... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” This is so easy to say. Like so many other words of faith, who can be opposed to these? Who can say that they are against peace? Who despises love? Who gladly rejects the very idea of hope? The whole litany of Christian words is tacitly acceptable: grace, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, justice, communion. These name the very rhythms essential to life, that connect us to God and, thereby, to one another. Yet the intense care with which Paul wrote of reconciliation reminds us that these terms are not just a cache of clever slogans, useful on occasion, when it's advantageous for something religious to be said. They name, rather, skills and disciplines that require devoted investigation and continual rehearsal over time if they are to have any meaning at all.

This is especially important to note now, because, as never before in history, words are cheap. We are inundated with claims that make grave threats and, just as quickly, offer tremendous promise. They slide past with the ease of the click of a mouse; they flash from moment to moment in series of commercials; with the press of a button we can instantly switch from one to any of hundreds of channels or stations; we can quickly flip through hundreds of pages in print. Words fly by.

But there is no swiftness in reconciliation.

Paul methodically reminds us that reconciliation isn't just one more term in the ceaseless flow of thousands. By his careful repetitions he declares that, in truth, reconciliation is our permanent vocation. It's the very meaning of our lives. The most intense focusing of all our capabilities happens in this action, in this interaction between us. Against all the other noise, this is the music of Christianity – which can't be learned once and then, from time to time, blithely reiterated. It demands constant, detailed vigilance that is nuanced, agile, patient, and rooted in dedication. Paul had no trouble being direct and clear about this; he knew that above all else, reconciliation is the absolutely necessary, basic, urgency of holiness. This, and this alone, is the perfect righteousness of God that we are privileged to show. We act as ambassadors in God's name most profoundly when this term becomes the substance of our actions. And apart from this, the word of God comes to nothing. Paul was, for once, strikingly succinct. Too much talk drains reconciliation of its brilliance. It has to be rehearsed more than endlessly discussed.

To this, then, we may add the parable of the prodigal son. It's a story that shows what reconciliation is without ever trying to explain how and for whom it should be offered. It's a parable that can't be reduced to a formula or a rule or a system, which would open it then to exceptions. It speaks, rather, from out of the natural complexity of human life, measuring reconciliation not by the coldness of means and ends but by the richness of relations and interdependence extended without limit, without need of excuse or justification. To reduce

the story to a moral would be disastrous. It would make it a slogan, bumper sticker nonsense. But in essence, the parable is really a meditation. It's a song that should be sung, the great anthem of faith that deserves being well rehearsed, each of its separate lines and its multiple rhythms carefully examined, learned in detail, so that our voices become agile in proclamation and our lives themselves expressive of a holiness that has no other reason than the beauty found in its music. A music that is eloquent, now, near and far, in response to all the world's many dispiriting disintegrations.

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