

## **Something Essential -- Pent+20 -- Proper 22C**

At the JavaChat on Thursday, Jerry reminded us of a great treat had by the movie watching crowd that assembles here on Wednesday evenings. Along with potluck dinner that sometime seems miraculous in its variety, he was referring to a documentary we saw awhile back about the Brazilian artist Vik Muniz and his portrait project among the subculture of recyclable trash pickers in Rio de Janeiro's vast central landfill. Muniz is best known for repurposing everyday materials for intricate and heavily layered artworks. He works in a range of media, from trash to (in a portrait of Andy Warhol) peanut butter and jelly, and his portraits reveal their subjects' personalities in an uncannily powerful and beautiful way. Having come from a place of severe poverty and desolation, the now-successful Muniz observes, "If I had to choose one or the other, I would rather want everything and have nothing than have everything and want nothing. At least when you want something, your life has meaning; it's worthwhile. From the moment you think you have everything, it's a constant search for meaning in other things."

When we listen to the Bible, we often hear the stories of and prophetic commentary about attachment to things, stuff: worldly wealth. For Jesus himself, this is a central theme. Sermons on the subject abound, in both the Old and New Testaments; we got a taste of one today, from the mysterious 7<sup>th</sup> Century BC prophet Habbakuk, a powerful ideological and rhetorical ancestor of Jesus, part of a long line of prophets protesting injustice and violence. It might

behoove us to listen to a larger part of Habbakuk's sermon, with its vivid imagery and timeless accuracy:

## **The Book of the prophet Habakkuk, Chapter 2**

I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what God will say to me, and what God will answer concerning my complaint. Then the Lord answered me and said: Write out the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that even a runner may read it. For there is indeed a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Meanwhile, look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

Moreover, wealth is treacherous; the arrogant do not endure. They open their throats as wide as Sheol; like Death they never have enough. They gather all nations for themselves, and collect all peoples as their own. Shall not everyone taunt such people and, with mocking riddles, say about them, "Alas for you who heap up what is not your own! How long will you load yourselves with goods taken in pledge? Will not your own creditors suddenly rise, and those who make you tremble wake up? Then you will be booty for them. Because you have plundered many nations, all that survive of the peoples shall plunder you— because of human bloodshed, and violence to the earth, to cities and all who live in them. Alas for you who get evil gain for your houses, setting your nest on high to be safe from the reach of harm! You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life. The very

stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork. Alas for you who build a town by bloodshed, and found a city on iniquity! Is it not against the Lord of hosts that peoples labor only to feed the flames that consume them, and do not the nations weary themselves for nothing? But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”

Now that is some powerful preaching. It is a message of warning for the overly rich and hope for the desperate poor. In a world where justice and peace are all-too greatly lacking, God promises they will ultimately prevail. Most of us (to return to the artist Muniz for a moment), most of us don't have or want either everything or nothing. We both have and want – most of us here have plenty – we're neither wealthy, nor are we poor. And we are not against the making of money. It's not the making of money, the collecting of resources, the building of nest eggs, but the way it's made, collected and built, and the uses to which it's put that matter.

Our Psalm picks up on the theme of wanting and having too -- in a very tricky way. If we put our faith in God, we will attain our heart's every desire. What they don't tell you, of course, is that once I put my faith in God, that itself becomes my heart's desire. When faith fills me, then I am full-filled *ad infinitum*. I am compelled by a power greater than any I have known to admit – and also bear witness to – God's holding up her end of the bargain. When in weakness, I cry out to God, the gracious touch brings healing, the renewal of courage and the power to meet every situation. God makes me a better offer than any

other. I think they call that argument *a fortiori*, but Latin class was a long time ago. Is there a lawyer in the house?

Furthermore, according to Luke's account, I will also be able to uproot mulberry trees and transplant them into the sea with just a word, although there is no explanation of why anyone would ever want to do such a thing. We will be fulfilled, and *ergo* made powerful. Our hearts desire will also be our calling. As Paul says in the letter to Timothy, God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power, love and self-discipline. We must guard the good treasure entrusted to us – by means of the Holy Spirit living in us -- even when such a calling leads to hard, seemingly thankless work and suffering for the sake of peace and justice.

This can be a scary proposition, full of trepidation and the possibility of failure – failure to get that fulfillment, failure to have enough; we might get lost in the shuffle, or mown down by the powerful. After all, as the proverb goes, "*Ella que no entrar a nadar, no se ahoga.*" 'If you don't go swimming, you can't drown.' So why risk it?

But if you want that old time feeling, the sweet joy of faith in God's grace and the triumph of peace, if you want it enough, by wanting it, you will have it; and that's everything. We take our satisfaction by reveling in the mere existence of Creation and compassion and affection, and we are, *ipso facto* made strong for the adventures ahead.

The poet Ted Loder responds to the glory of power with this prayer:

## Let Something Essential Happen to Me

O God, let something essential happen to me, something more than interesting, or entertaining, or thoughtful.

O God, let something essential happen to me, something awesome, something real. Speak to my condition, Lord, and change me somewhere inside where it matters, a change that will burn and tremble and heal and explode me into tears or laughter or love that throbs or screams or keeps a terrible, cleansing silence and dares the dangerous deeds.

Let something happen in me which is my real self, God....

O God,  
let something essential and joyful happen in me now,  
something like the blooming of hope and faith,  
like a grateful heart,  
like a surge of awareness  
of how precious each moment is,  
that now, not next time,  
now is the occasion  
to take off my shoes  
to see every bush afire,  
to leap and whirl with neighbor,  
to gulp the air as sweet wine  
until I've drunk enough  
to dare to speak the tender word:  
"Thank you"  
"I love you"  
"You're beautiful"  
"Let's live forever beginning now"  
and "I'm a fool for Christ's sake."