

“WHEN THINGS ARE MUCH MORE THAN THEY SEEM”

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In her book *The Greek Way*, Edith Hamilton claims the temple priests of ancient Greece had a personal stake in cultivating a fear of mystery among the masses. Priests always denigrate rational efforts at unraveling the unknown to explain life because priests use mystery to keep ignorant people down, Hamilton informs us.

I don't know much about ancient Greece, but I know why mystery matters to this priest. And it is not just because Paul the Apostle describes Christian pastors as “stewards of God's mysteries.” (I Corinthians 4.1) It is because mystery is a real part of life and not something we priests have dreamt up. It's because if we don't make space to lift up and revere eternal truth, at once deeper and vaster than we are, and find ways to live into sacred truth, we end up either reducing religion to magic. Or we reduce religion to pseudoscientific self-improvement, which is very impersonal. Either way, it diminishes us, and we miss out on what matters most.

So let me ask, do you ever have moments--not every day or every moment--when you sense how things run deeper than surface appearances? It could be staring at heavenly bodies in the dark of night or the inexplicable look of a stranger on a train. But an awe-filled sense of mystery wells up from within evoking wonder in the best possible way. In that moment, mystery doesn't interrupt or restrain what is most real. Mystery is an essential quality for what is real. And that effect frees us up to dream dreams and see new visions. We priests are not ashamed of that.

Let me give you an example that could seem trivial on the face of things, but has possibilities when viewed through eyes of faith. And that is mostly what today's sermon is about: how we come here to learn together to see through eyes of faith.

I recall the night I mailed my application to Yale Divinity School. I left work early because I still had a lot of preparation left. And I was nearly fired. In a few days I would traverse South America for four months. I had already applied to several graduate schools. But I had come by this peculiar and exhilarating idea also to apply to seminary. So I worked all evening finishing the Yale Divinity application. When I finished, I couldn't fall asleep, both puzzled and intoxicated by what I was doing. So I went for a winter walk to clear my head and mail the application. It felt both odd and fitting, this idea of studying theology. Striding nowhere, I lost track of time. In a black night flecked with white snow, I just lost myself. So I looked up for a street sign to orient myself. I was at Yale Street. I smiled and walked home.

You could call me crazy to take that moment as a sign of divine communication. But to say that you would have to make some decisions about what kind of world we live in. Is it a world where God is alive and at work, intruding, acting, speaking? Or is it not such a world. If it is, that means God's self-disclosure is possible.

Let me tell a similar story, this one about someone else I know, called to ministry. Back in the mid-90s, when I was a pastor in Colorado, our youth minister Demory was called to divinity school. Demory also did childcare for my middle-school girls, Greta and Lise, during the week. A west coast seminary wooed her with a full scholarship. But this school was not one the associate pastor and I endorsed. We urged her to consider another seminary. Grudgingly, Demory agreed to visit Duke Divinity School. Our church covered her travel costs. I arranged for an interview with Stanley Hauerwas--the brilliant, provocative, irascible professor.

So Demory flew to North Carolina and sat with the formidable Mr. Hauerwas. He didn't try to charm and affirm; rather, he challenged and provoked her. That's just how he is. The same people who trained Stanley trained me. They don't stroke any egos. Demory came away from the interview saying, "Why am I here? I don't need this abuse. I don't even want to go here. And God knows I can't afford it."

Demory wanted to turn and exit, but she felt guilty. We had paid her expenses. Resisting the urge to flee, she decided to go through the motions, out of respect. Demory sat in the financial aid office learning how little scholarship money was available at Duke and how poor it would make her. Then the phone rang and the financial aid officer picked it up. Demory couldn't help but overhear. "You're at the Pacific School of Religion? You want to transfer to Duke Divinity?" Well, that got her attention. PSR was her other seminary choice. "So what is your name?" the financial officer asked. "Uh huh, yes. *Greta Rosenberger*. I've got it, thanks."

Demory froze in her chair. *Greta Rosenberger*. Not an everyday, average name, is it? She didn't know what it meant, hearing the name of the girl for whom she babysat, whose dad sent her there. She felt God trying to get her attention. She yielded herself anew her visit. It got her attention and opened her up. From that moment, Demory perceived everything differently. At lunch with Divinity students, she felt a strong gravitational pull. Suddenly, she saw Duke as a special opportunity. She did an about-face and attended Duke despite incurring tens of thousands of dollars in debt. Not only this, that same mean, insensitive Prof. Stanley Hauerwas preached at Demory's wedding as she married one of his teaching assistants. All on a chance name in a throwaway conversation. By the way, the other Greta Rosenberger family was in the Cape Cod church I served years later.

It is curious how few places there are where it's acceptable to share such a story. I can't tell you how often perfectly sane people approach me, looking furtively over their shoulders, like film actors in the days of McCarthyism. "You are going to think this is crazy," they whisper. Then they tell of the unlikely impulse coming out of nowhere and diverting their life course; the long lost friend who appeared and reminded them of something essential they had long forgotten; the course of action that came out of the blue, and took over their lives, making their days holy.

Now we're ready to rehearse our gospel story where much more is at stake than meets the eye. Funny how the Bible demands of us an expanded consciousness.

Funny also how the modern, scientific world sees itself as open or broad-minded when in fact, by making things user-friendly, we've flattened and reduced reality.

Jesus had come to the end of his ministry. A sense of foreboding and inevitable gloom had been gathering for a while but only now were things coming to a head. Jesus' enemies, who'd been lurking in fringe shadows, now mobilize against him. In that backdrop, before Jesus takes his followers to the capital city, they gather with close friends, Mary and Martha, for a dinner. John opens the story saying, "Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead." What was that? Can you imagine sitting down at a dinner party with a man who'd been dead a week before? I've no idea how those introductions get made.

No sooner does the soup reach the table than Mary adoringly falls all over Jesus. She anoints his feet with her hair, perfuming the whole house with a precious, rare fragrance. For Mary has used not just a few ounces, but a full pound of this costly perfume. But it smells more like callow lilies than like the house of Chanel. As Rick Floyd writes, Mary's act was *fragrant* as well as *flagrant*. Frankly, her act of devotion over Jesus is unabashedly sensual, even erotic. I mean, as a young clergyman, I cannot recall that ever happening to me. So what is its significance?

Jewish women of that time usually wore their hair tied up in public. Only two occasions would have called for such an extravagant display of her hair and self, 1) when undressing for her husband or, 2) as a sign of distraction when mourning, like putting on sackcloth and wearing ashes, letting her hair go wild. So Mary plays the role of brazen lover as well as distraught mourner by wiping Jesus' feet.

Judas is there as well. Good committed liberal that he is, ever aware of Rome's hobnail boot of injustice on their neck, he makes a moral comment, "Why wasn't this rare perfume sold or given to the poor rather than lavishing it on Jesus' feet? What a waste!" Only someone who cared for the poor as much as Jesus did could get away with saying, "The poor you'll always have with you. But not me." So very true! The poor we still have with us, but they marched Jesus to his death.

A meal that should have celebrated their new heights in ministry, as evidenced by the Palm Sunday parade of acclamation declaring Jesus as king, was really a prelude to his grisly crucifixion. At this same table are Jesus' closest friends and his most notorious enemy, whose name still means betrayal. The sweet smelling perfume of love blends with a fragrant embalming of a good man taken too soon. Mystery enfolds us as life's backstory adds up to so much more than things seem.

It is true also of what happens in this sacred space. In a few moments, after this hour of worship, Gary and I will explain to third graders the many suggestive meanings of a morsel of bread and thimble of juice preparing them for this table. God help us if we fail to open our hearts and over-explain what none fully grasp. Here, where God meets us, more is always going on beneath the obvious. In the hymns, in the prayers, in the sermon, in the sacraments--we receive messages

bigger than we are. Insight is granted us. Inspiration is given we never asked for, we never sought. The table could be Mary and Martha's or this table down below. Much of what we perceive is about our willingness to see through eyes of faith. Amen.