

Homily August 4 2024 From where will come my help? 18th Sunday in OT

Ezekiel 16:2-4, 12-18 Ps 117 Acts 20: 6ab, 4-5, 6c -10, 12, 11 Mark 8:1-9a

In 2022, Pádraig Ó Tuama edited a collection of poems called *Poetry Unbound: 50 Poems to Open Your World* which features his commentary on each of the 50 poems he has chosen. This week I was quite moved to read a poem by Lemn Sissay called “Some Things I Like.” Initially I was perplexed because the poem begins:

I like wrecks, I like ex-junkies,
I like flunks, and ex-flunkies
I like the way the career-less career,
I like flat beer.

The poem carries on to name countless unconventional and potentially irritating “likes” – “I like people who can’t say what they mean” and “curtains that don’t quite shut.” (Quotes from p. 82).

One point that can be taken away from this poem is: for the sake of inclusivity, one can come to like what is unlikeable. That which seems not to belong or fit in is welcomed purposefully as a “like.”

Pádraig fills us in on the poet’s background. Lemn Sissay, was placed in the British care system at two months old with his own name changed from its Ethiopian origins to a British “Norman.” He was taken from his unwed college student mom who refused to sign papers for the nuns to give him up for adoption. He therefore was put into foster care and lived a painful life of abandonment from his first care family after age 12. He suffered a tumultuous teenage journey which took him in and out of abusive foster care homes and facilities. “This poem,” says Pádraig Ó Tuama, “knows the inside of rejection, and from that same inside, writes welcome.”¹

In an interview², Sissay says that the child in the government’s care “is most in need” and that that young one’s care can be taken as a measurement as to how the government’s parenting role is effective in terms of education, health, and housing. If the foster child’s needs are met, then everyone else’s needs are met because these kids are very much the ones in most need.³

¹ Pádraig Ó Tuama, *Poetry Unbound: 50 Poems to Open Your World* (Edinburgh: Cannongate) 2022, 85.

² *Ways to Change the World*, podcast with Krishnan Guru-Murthy on *Let the Light Pour In* by Lemn Sissay. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRsr6QbPHp4&t=19s> (sourced August 2, 2024).

³ Ibid.

Which brings us to our readings today. There is a strong message of need in both the story from Ezekiel and Mark's gospel. And a question, as to how that need will be met.

Elisha's servant speaks of his incredulity and his common sense as he witnesses to a great need and holds up the 20 barley loaves, "How can I serve this to a hundred people?" Indeed, how? How can a little be given to too many? What is the key to enough and abundance?

The response from Elisha is one of trust: "Give it to the people to eat, for the All-Loving One says this: 'They will eat and have some left over.'" Elisha intuits, he *sees* through his loving connection with the Holy One that there will be enough and more. He trusts the Loving One to provide.

Brendan Byrne⁴ points out in the gospel story of the feeding of four thousand families, that the first feeding of the crowd of 5,000 families was of Israelites, Jesus' own people, who seem lost and without a shepherd. This second group from today's gospel is gathered on gentile ground and his feeding them, comes out of the teaching of the Syrophenician woman, who opened Jesus's eyes to see that even the dogs eat the crumbs under the table. They *are* deserving and he is to serve them, to *see* them differently.

Also, perhaps, in the number 4,000, we can understand a symbolism of the four corners of the world.⁵ Jesus' purpose is to serve everyone, way more than what he initially understood, and certainly not limited to his own people. He is to be radically inclusive. This is not his neighbourhood, it's more like a "foster" group from a different nation than his own. It is his empathy for their situation of 3 days without food that leads to his concern for their physical wellbeing.

"I am concerned for all these people, for they have been with us for three days with no food. Some of them have come from a great distance, and if I send them away hungry, they might lose their strength and faint."

He taught them for three days. This reveals his desire to provide them with education, that they be sustained for both their travel home *and* their journey of life with relationships to the land and one another.

Perhaps one of the characteristics of care that governments in charge of foster children's upbringing lack in countries like Great Britain and our own, is empathy—to see people like the

⁴ Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press).

⁵ CCL notes for 4 August 2024.

infant Lemn Sissay, coming from an unwed mother who did not want to let him go, not as someone in need of moral correction and in their eyes, “a proper” home away from his young mother, but one who needs acceptance, meaningful connection and provision that his unwed mother and pilot father could have offered.

Ó Tuama says of the “I” in the poem that “It’s the capacity of the speaker in this poem to look around, and see, and create connection where disconnection has been assumed.” *We can* make room and provision for what we initially see as lacking or upsetting and so, reject. We see this with those who welcome fire and flood and war refugees. We see this in the life of vikki, priest in Vancouver who co-founded the Catholic Worker House.

So we come to this eucharistic table of ceremony, as did Paul and the young man who fell out of the window. We are encouraged by the psalm to see everyone included in the “One Big Heart” of Psalm 117 and we trust that when we come to “like” what is initially distasteful, bothersome, or rejected that *we see* and live into the love of a Godde who accepts us in all of our need and our unlikeability.

It is Sissay’s “looking that makes things likeable.”⁶ The final word in the poem is a command. “See.” It is Elisha and Jesus’s seeing and believing that feeds the people.

QUESTION What do you notice in the readings/liturgy? When have you come to like something that you formerly disliked?

⁶Ó Tuama, 85.