

Reflections, November–December 2011

Friday, November 3, 2011

Philosopher Stanley Cavell writes, "Our problem is not a lack of good ideas. Our problem is that we can't keep our very best ideas from becoming ideologized."

He means, I think, that in our hands ideas become turf to be defended, agendas to be promoted, vehicles for scoring points. So true, and sometimes so hurtful. Who hasn't felt slighted or bitter when their own idea or suggestion or insight got trumped by somebody else's "better" one?

The best idea isn't always, well, the best; good enough is sometimes better. It depends on the timing, the circumstances, and most of all, the people involved. As Paul taught, knowledge and good ideas have their place, but love must govern their use.

Friday, November 10, 2011

There it was, on the inside of my dorm room door my first day at Kenyon College: a life-size photograph of Smokin' Joe Frazier.

I hadn't met my roommate, but I knew he was white, a jock, and from a very well-to-do California family. Right away I judged this to be an instance of distasteful "slumming."

As it turned out, I was quite wrong. Pete was handsome, garrulous, aggressive and, for those who really knew him, quite vulnerable. He had a big, generous heart and was prone to sentimentality and tears. Though charismatic and popular, he never quite fit in at Kenyon, and left after his freshman year. Muhammad Ali—"dance like a butterfly, sting like a bee"—was the darling of the intellectuals, but Frazier was Pete's kind of guy. Frazier believed in hitting people hard until they fell down and couldn't get up, and Ali's taunting cut him to the heart. Pete looked at his picture a lot during the year we were roommates.

"I am leaving, I am leaving," said the boxer, but the fighter still remain" Despite his elite upbringing, Pete, like Frazier, was more a fighter than a boxer. Ironically, Frazier the fighter is now gone and the boxer, a tragically diminished Ali, still remains. He needed Frazier and, in his now befuddled consciousness, grieves for him. I lost track of Pete decades ago, but I know he's grieving too.

Friday, November 17, 2011

I recently heard a scholar advocate raising the age of Medicare eligibility. "After all," he said, "The most strenuous thing most Americans do is get up from their chair to go home at 5 pm."

Hmm, I thought. Wonder if he's considered the people who built the structure that houses his office, the maintenance crew that cleans it up, the farmers, truckers, cooks, waitstaff and busboys who produced, transported, prepared, served and cleaned up after his lunch.

I thought, too, of the stresses of office work these days. Electronic communications have turned some desk jobs into continuous staff meetings, board meetings and performance evaluations. It's common to sit at a desk all day and be drained at 5 pm.

Medicare has to be reformed, and maybe higher eligibility ages will be necessary. But let's remember that many people really are, yes, entitled to it, not to mention in need of it, at 65. We might have to ask them to make a sacrifice and hold off till they're, say, 67. If we do, we should thank them, and refrain from intimating that they're slackers.

Friday, November 24, 2011

I think of Charles Price, professor of liturgics and theology at Virginia Theological Seminary during my time there, every year at Thanksgiving. One of his daughters died suddenly, at the age of six, under the most tragic of circumstances. Affliction and loss dogged his family. He strove to maintain the Anglican Via Media, or Middle Way, in times of stark division and rancor in the church. I never heard him complain, but his faithfulness to what he believed must have exacted a high cost. Further, the low-church tradition of liturgical simplicity, exemplified by Virginia Seminary and defended by Charlie with deep conviction, had already begun to fray when he died fifteen years ago.

But he directed these words, found in a prayer he composed (page 836 of our Book of Common Prayer), to God: "We thank you ... for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone." "Disappointments and failures," here, run the gamut from not finding a good parking place to grievous suffering. So the prayer enjoins us to give thanks in, through and, yes, even for those things that can make us wonder what kind of God we serve, or even if there is one.

Charlie wrote these words because he meant them. I don't know if or when I, or almost anybody I know, will reach this depth and breadth of gratitude. Somehow we know, though—as Charlie knew—that learning to "give thanks to (God) for all things" sets us free.

Friday, December 1, 2011

You might remember that Francisco Rodríguez Vásquez, a young man from my Spanish-speaking congregation in Chicago, died from injuries sustained in a bantamweight title fight in Philadelphia almost exactly two years ago.

I thought of his family when we heard Jesus' parable of the talents a couple of weeks ago. In the story, the man who received just one talent from his master buried it in the ground, bitterly resentful of the one he saw as a "hard man" who reaped where he did not sow and gathered what he had not scattered.

Francisco's family had every reason to see God as a "hard man," a thief, really, who had at the very least allowed their youngest son to be taken from them. But they did not bury all of their son, their treasure, their "talent," in the ground. Before interment, they allowed his organs to be harvested. One kidney went to an uncle who would not have lived long without it.

This decision cannot have been easy, its pain and difficulty compounded by their deep roots in Mexican catholicism. Regardless, and with considerable courage, they invested what remained of their "niño azteca" ("Aztec boy," as he was known in the boxing world) in the health and well-being of others. I hope they can hear the words Jesus is speaking in their hearts: "Well done, good and faithful servants."

Thursday, December 8, 2011

We're on the home stretch of our stewardship campaign for 2012. We had received approximately \$267,000.00 in pledges for 2012 as of the beginning of this week. In order to maintain current levels of staff and program with a balanced budget, we need to receive at least \$290,000.00 in pledges. The Stewardship Committee's goal is \$300,000.00, and with this amount we would enjoy a small cushion and could even consider (very) modest expansion of our ministry.

All of us can help wrap things up, in the following ways.

- 89 families and individuals have made pledges, many of them very generous, even sacrificial. Your commitment sustains us all, materially and spiritually. Your job, as we see this campaign through to its conclusion, is to join us in thanksgiving to God who gives us, through you, the means to maintain and grow the ministries of this place.
- Some of you, newcomers and longer-term members alike, have not yet pledged for 2012. Please consider doing so as soon as you can.
- A few of you have made a pledge but may, in your heart of hearts, know you could afford to commit to a higher amount. Please consider submitting a revised pledge card.
- Finally, some have experienced a sharp reduction of resources, mostly

due to unemployment. We know that you can't match previous years' commitments, but hope you will sustain the habit of stewardship by pledging whatever you can.

Some churches have large reserves and endowments. Grace does not. We should give thanks to God for this circumstance. The commitment of our current members makes Grace possible, and this is as it should be. We treasure our history, but know that its meaning rests in what we do now, and in the future for which we hope, plan and prepare.

Thursday, December 15, 2011

Lots of Americans remember, perhaps with a measure of shame, the departure of U.S. troops from Vietnam in 1975. Many, though fewer, recall the cease-fire that ended the Korean War. And for some, Victory in Europe and Victory over Japan days remain a vivid memory.

Today's departure of U.S. troops from Iraq differs markedly from each and all of these endings, as did the war itself from the earlier ones.

In many ways, though, the differences pale in comparison with the similarities. As is the case in every war, so very many young people—Americans, Iraqis and others—"shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old;" so very many fought with undaunted courage, and otherwise conducted themselves nobly, in the service of the highest ideals; a few degraded themselves, and our shared humanity. And while the Allies' decisive victory World War II contrasts sharply with the ambiguity of Iraq, yet we live with "the good war's" consequences, desired and undesired, intended and unintended, to this day. Its shadow hangs over the Euro-zone crisis. In exactly parallel fashion, we shall be engaging, or fleeing, the consequences of the war in Iraq for decades to come.

"There is nothing new under the sun," writes the author of Ecclesiastes. War is war is war. The words that console nations and peoples in war's aftermath ring down the ages, too. President Lincoln's words, spoken nearly 150 years ago at the end of a war characterized both by unthinkable violence and unparalleled nobility, speak as directly to us as they did to a much younger nation: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." Let us do so, indeed, now as then.

Thursday, December 22, 2011

Readings at the Easter Vigil service include the story of the Israelites' flight from Pharaoh's armies. They "hastened with unmoisten'd foot" through the Red Sea, but the waters closed on their Egyptian pursuers. Once, at a Spanish-language Vigil service in Chicago, the reader got choked up and had trouble finishing the story. Later I asked her what she found so moving. She said, "All those poor Egyptian soldiers."

Matthew's gospel tells us that Joseph, warned in a dream, took Mary and the infant Jesus to Egypt until the end of Herod's reign. This was to fulfill Hosea's prophecy, "Out of Egypt have I called my son."

The lives of the Egyptian foot-soldiers, who did as they were ordered to do and died in the Red Sea's waters, didn't differ much from those of the Hebrew slaves, who had to find their own straw and still meet the daily brick quota. Both groups lived and died, labored and bled, at the whim of a tyrant. By virtue of his descent into Egypt, the infant Jesus claimed Egyptian and Israelite alike as his own. A new covenant begins, and it embraces all who yearn to know how it feels to be free. "Weep with all who weep," writes Paul, "and rejoice with all who rejoice." My Chicago parishioner knew exactly what he meant.

Thursday, December 29, 2011

William Faulkner wrote, in 1951's *Requiem for a Nun*, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." The quote puts a damper on New Year celebrations, which often focus on new beginnings.

Still, it's important to recognize the power of the past. We can't decide how to apply the past to the present unless we recognize its influence. This does not require that we agree with Faulkner's assessment of history as all-pervasive and suffocating.

"(God's mercies) are new every morning," wrote the author of the Biblical Lamentations to the Israelites in exile, far from their homeland. Their own long history of iniquity and rebellion had led to this "Babylonian captivity." Surely the daily renewal offered by a merciful God, let alone the "new beginning" of the nation's return to its own land, would come only as the dispossessed community came to terms with its past. The new year invites us to look back, so we can look forward.