

Personal Integration as Eucharistic Homecoming

Sermon at Stone-Campbell Dialogue

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After World War II William Tecumseh Sherman Williams went over to his Son-in-Law's house and picked him up.

"Where we going?" asked Archie Ellett, who in less than 20 years would reach the pinnacle of worldly success in becoming my great grandfather.

"I'll tell you when we get there." Sherman replied. (Abrahamic call narrative, here)

Grandpa Sherman's Dad had marched through Georgia. But the the son, a gentle, Campbellite elder (not an oxymoron) marched through the hills and hollers of Monroe County, Indiana healing from from his father's victory. Pulling into is grandson's driveway my great, great grandfather Sherman set about healing his son-in-law, his grandchild and his severed family. The three of generations of men gathered around the family table. I know none of the conversational details—only that through Grandpa Sherman's tearful eyes they all saw Jesus. Both my great grandfather Archie (who also became an elder in the church) and his Son (who became a powerful preacher) got to come home. There were literal homecomings in the years to come which had been impossible for years. I knew nothing of this story until a couple years ago. All I ever experienced was Great Grandpa Archie proudly listening to his son proclaim the wonders of Jesus' reconciling love.

I tell this story in order to say that human beings cannot be defragmented like hard-drives, mystically rewired while the rest of us sleep. Psychic re-integration is a kind of homecoming that can and should take place around a family table. "*Is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ*" Paul asks.ⁱ Christian Salvation is recapitulation. It is the experience of all things reconciled and integrated *under one head, even Christ*.ⁱⁱ So we should not be surprised to experience healing as a kind of social integration where walled-off parts of the self also learn to speak lovingly to each other.ⁱⁱⁱ In Frost's words in *The Armful*—"extremes too hard to comprehend at once" are still things we "care not to leave behind." Healing is a kind of sitting down in the middle of the road and stacking our lives in a better load so we can hold our whole selves, in the language of the poem, "bottles and buns" together close to breast.^{iv}

To be walled off from one's children, like my great grandfather, is to be walled off from your hopes and dreams. To be walled off from a spouse—to have to "start over," as we say, is to sever a certain kind of relationship with your past. When we are invited by Las Vegas to a vacation from ourselves with the false assurance that "what happens here stays here," we are actually being invited to live a fragmented life—to have profound memories that must be walled off from family, work and all that constitutes the self. It is to live in the midst of one of those Faulkner novels I can't make it through. What happens "there" is the self is "dis-integrated." The problem is not just that home does not understand what has secretly happened to us—the problem is also that we no longer have a knowable self to lug home.

Upon coming home from the First World War C. S. Lewis rather famously established “a treaty with reality”—a kind of fixed frontier against his experiences of “horribly smashed men still moving like half crushed beetles.” Memories of the war were in his words, “cut off from the rest of his experience.”^v These were not the only frontiers fixed in him. Unable to tell a meaningful story about the childhood death of his Mother, unable to speak or tell the truth to his father, enraged by peers and teachers, it is perhaps no coincidence that in his autobiography Lewis admits that there was a “huge and complex episode” upon his coming home that still could not be told without greater brokenness late in life.^{vi}

Guilt that cannot be integrated into a story of forgiveness and liberation must sublimate itself, creating ghettos of ongoing denial. The craving to appear—the temptation to pretend—to engage in what is commonly called putting our best foot forward-- must choke down ignorance and hide inability, agedness and smallness or whatever else contemporary culture shames. Trauma that we cannot experience alongside the God of the cross, and loss, un-grieved apart from the hope of resurrection, divide into suppressed enclaves of the soul that soon lack structural integrity. Rage often runs away from the past like an adolescent who can't wait to blow his hometown. Or it flees the future like an old woman seeking the security of Egyptian slavery where there were plenty of leeks and onions. Divided souls cannot hold past and present together nor can they own their own sin and forgiveness, failure and dignity, and hurt and hope together. As Frost suggests these are “extremes “too hard to comprehend at once.” We have looked into such persons’ eyes. And we have seen that the lights are on but nobody is home. The psyche is so divided that speaking to such people, or to trying to get close to such people, is like trying to have a relationship with an answering machine.

The Lights are on but nobody is home. This is the essential creed of the pantheist. For increasing numbers of westerners there is an indifferent, impersonal mystery at the heart of the world—this mystery shines through all things-- but there is no personal God truly there to welcome us home, and meaningfully locate our lives.

Grandpa Sherman knew the Christian tradition Invites folks to a table where there is a personal Presence, who socially and mystically and vocally confronts and forgives. The gospel is that not only are the lights on in the kitchen; there is somebody home at the table! Someone to bear our guilt and acknowledge it as true, but who nonetheless will not let us go. We can eat living bread, and behold his form.^{vii} And as a result the Lord Jesus still lights the eyes of the disintegrated, inviting those who were once *blasphemers and a persecutors and a violent men* to tell coherent stories about their lives. Our very brokenness, as in the case of Paul, becomes an integral part of our future witness. Thus, Paul makes sense of his own violent past. Precisely “*for that reason*” [that he was a violent man] he says, “*I was shone mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display unlimited patience.*”^{viii}

Everything else is icing. Nothing else we do will matter if we cannot set and sit at a table where we taste the King of Glory *bringing all things together whether things on earth or in heaven into himself.* Robert Richardson said it well. “It is here” [at such a table] “we may revive the recollections of the past and bid the burial places of memory to give up their dead that we may go with them into the holy city.”^{ix} Here is a table that connects us with buried parts of the self and with the saints of all ages. Here’s a place to call home-- where no part of ourselves is left un-cleansed, where our whole spirits, our whole emotional life our entire social, economic and physical embodiment come together with blameless integrity.^x There is a table that invites us to live and tell a coherent story. Welcome home. Come! Eat and challenge and forgive one another as a foretaste of the perfect integration that is to come.

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 10:16

ⁱⁱ Colossians 1:20

ⁱⁱⁱ While not totally unaware of its use in psychoanalysis, my use of the word “self” is more influenced by readings of Kierkegaard who calls us to a purity of heart which “wills one thing.” This, together with and my life-long internal dialogue with sometimes warring parts of myself, accounts for my usage.

^{iv} Frost, Robert. “The Armful.” The Poetry of Robert Frost. New York: Holt 1969. 266-7.

^v Lewis, C. S. Surprised by Joy. San Diego: Harcourt 1955. 196.

^{vi} Ibid. 198.

^{vii} John 5:37 and 6:48

^{viii} 1 Timothy 1:13-16

^{ix} Richardson, Robert. Communings in the Sanctuary. C. Leonard Allen editor. Orange CA: New Leaf 2000. 57-58.

^x 1 Thessalonians 5:23