

Ash Wednesday

Almsgiving, Prayer and Fasting

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18. We think of Ash Wednesday in terms of dust and ashes, and of the resolve to turn away from our sins, because these are the themes of the day's special liturgical rite. But the day's Gospel actually mentions none of these. The Gospel introduces us to Lent by focusing instead on the traditional Lenten practices of almsgiving, prayer and fasting. That we'll *do* these activities is taken for granted: Each section of the reading begins with "*Whenever* you give alms/pray/fast..." It's *how* we do them that is the Gospel's concern. We're firmly instructed to do them "in secret."

"Whenever you give alms/pray/fast," don't do it showily like hypocrites; "truly I tell you, they have received their reward." Three times we hear this warning, word for word, and three times we hear the positive command: "when you give alms/pray/fast," do it "in secret." Then at the end of each verse comes the refrain: "and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." With its repeated refrain and parallel phrasing, this Gospel feels very much like a poem. So it's natural to enter it anew by means of a poetic reflection.

Let's enter the scene with the poets.

from Love's Bitten Tongue

Lord, hush this ego as one stops a bell
Clanging, cupping it softly in the palm.
Should it make music, silence it as well,
For there's no difference when one wants calm
Of silence from the ego's loud tinnitus
Buzzing in spirit's ear with no relief,
With every reverence a false hiatus
Which brings those moments I name prayer to grief,
Tempt me to think I better honor them
By turning away from prayer as I did once.
So my thoughts, snared by their own strategem,
Like balls that children toss aside, all bounce
In my head back and forth until despair
Of praying may, in mercy, become prayer.

—Vassar Miller

*Let's pause and sit with the poem before going further;
reread it more slowly, let it sink in.*



“Lord.” As I step into the poem, I step into prayer with this very first word: the poem is addressing God. With the next word, I know that it’s petitionary prayer, a plea. “Lord, hush...”; it’s a plea for quieting. And coming immediately next upon “this ego,” I know it’s *internal* quieting that I—or the “I” of the poem, the speaker—need.

She takes me then to a comparison: Her ego needs hushing like a bell, whose unpleasant “clanging” I’m hurled into without the chance to catch my breath, since no punctuation at the end of the line lets me pause. From “clanging” I step solidly onto “cupping”: The repeated “c” (“clanging, cupping”) cements the two words like adjacent matched pathstones. But suddenly something about their coupling makes me trip. I look down. Oh, I see: It’s that they don’t refer to the same subject. The *bell* is what’s clanging, while the *person* (the “one”) trying to stop it is “cupping it softly in the palm.” The poet has chosen to throw me off balance a bit so that I’ll jerk just as if I were grabbing to stop a clanging bell.

I move to line three. Even if the bell makes music instead of a clang, “silence it” is still the poet’s plea. And beginning with the next line, I start to learn why. Music and clanging are equal annoyances when they come from the ego: that is, when they’re “the ego’s loud tinnitus,” that distracting background noise of a constant “buzzing” in the ear. “Silence” from the ego’s noise is what “one wants.” That “silence”: The poet brings me a second time to the word. A poet carefully chooses each word on a poem’s walkway; so when she decides to repeat a word, I know it’s important. She is setting it up as a signpost on the path, calling it to my attention.

“With every reverence a false hiatus....” The poem’s path is stretching out along a lengthening sentence, as the poet extends her plea against the ego. Here, she leads me into her dashed hopes for a break from her ego’s self-absorbed buzzing. Every hoped-for “hiatus”—every apparently reverent moment of prayer—turns out to be “false.” Instead of “relief,” the reverence that she longs to call prayer comes to “grief.”

“Tempts me....” This sentence has gotten so long (I’ve now entered its seventh line!) that I need to stop and get my grammatical bearings. Stretching out the sentence through grammatical twists and turns, the poet crafts for me a frustration much like the experience she is describing, of being caught in the ego’s snares. In a moment of panic, I wonder: *what* tempts me? The ego? The hiatus? Whatever it is, the temptation is clear—and dreadful: to “turn away from prayer” altogether, “as I did once.” I sigh with relief that I’ve come to the end of the sentence. But it’s an end that’s no true relief, that’s truly another grief, because it is the stopping of prayer. The poem’s walk has taken me to what feels like a hopeless dead end.

I do go on, but into a thicket. My thoughts “snared by their own stratagem”—caught in the temptation to give up on prayer—hiss at me through those doubled “s”s like a snake. Then they “bounce in my head” like balls carelessly tossed aside by children, as if I’m trapped in a frantic play-space that takes over the space in my head. “Back and forth” my frantic thoughts bounce, until I come—at the end of the poem’s next-to-last line—to “despair.”

What saves me, however, is the absence of punctuation at the line’s end. With nothing like a period or even a

comma to hold me, I move without pause into the poem's final line, where I come, twice, to "prayer." Mercifully, prayer is forcing itself through all the obstacles against it. *Four* times, I now see, the poet has grabbed onto the word: Four signposts saying "prayer" have kept her going, and kept me going in hope along with her. And, yes, that's where the poem's final line finally brings me: to the hope that somehow, "in mercy," the very "despair of praying" may itself "become prayer."

And I recall that the poem has in fact all along been a prayer: a plea to the "Lord."

"Pray to your Father who is in secret," the Gospel instructs us. "Go into your room and shut the door." Pray alone in silence, not noisily for all to see. But what if the room of my soul is a racket? What if my ego is blaring like the hypocrites' trumpet in the streets? Praying (or giving alms or fasting) *in secret*—in the true hush of a humble self-effacing silence—is easier said than done. That's where the poem has led me: to see how challenging this Gospel's imperatives really are. Challenging because my own ego is the hypocrite that insists on calling attention to itself, whatever it does. When I give alms in order to get praise from others (or even just from myself), or when I call attention to my fasting, the ego has already, as the Gospel says, "received its reward": self-satisfaction.

The Gospel instructs us to quiet the ego; the poem dramatizes what a struggle this can be. Yet falling in desperation onto God's mercy, the poem lands on the reward promised in the Gospel refrain: the secret meeting of my soul with God, which is true prayer. Lord, hush this ego, I pray.

Now I wonder...

- I wonder about the rhymes in the poem. The poem is a sonnet: fourteen lines rhyming in a pattern (here, a pattern of every other line rhyming, until the final two lines). Do any of the rhymes particularly catch my attention?
- I wonder about the poem's title. This poem is the first in a series of twenty-two linked sonnets, during which "Love's Bitten Tongue" eventually becomes Jesus silencing himself on the cross. In this opening sonnet, is the longed-for silencing of ego perhaps a form of biting my tongue?
- I wonder about how poetry in general might lead me to my God "who is in secret." Poets are experts on the inner life: They explore the hidden places of our soul. "Poetry leads us to the unstructured sources of our beings, to the unknown," wrote poet A. R. Ammons; "poetry is a verbal means to a non-verbal source. It is a motion to no-motion, to the still point of contemplation and deep realization."¹ At that still point, does God await me "in secret"?
- And I wonder about that "motion to no-motion" that poetry is. Poetry's motion is never a rush, never a race or even a power walk. It's a stroll like my favorite Sunday afternoon activity: a walk with my husband in the woods, along a well-marked path, with time to poke into the side paths, to gaze at the leaves, or just to sit. I need this ramble to quiet the pace of weekday life; I need poetry for

the same reason. If I do without either for too long,
I don't do well.

*Returning to read the poem one more time...
is there a line or so that I want to memorize, to make my own?*