

The Wings of the Morning

There was a feel-good video that made the rounds a while back. An adorable red-headed boy is raiding the pantry in his Brooklyn home. He goes to the drawer and takes all the Twinkies and stashes them in his knapsack. Then he goes to the refrigerator and gets two bottles of apple juice and adds them to his supplies. Just then, his mother comes in and asks, "Where are you off to?"

The little boy replies, "I'm going to find God."

His mother intrepidly says, "Good luck, dinner is at six, don't be late."

At this point the video requires either substantial suspension of disbelief or a robust endorsement of free-range parenting, because the little boy leaves his house, takes the subway into the city, and travels unsupervised to what appears to be Central Park.

The camera then turns its gaze to a park bench where a somewhat ragged but otherwise well-groomed middle-aged woman is sitting behind a large shopping bag, with another bag beside her. Her sweatshirt is torn and her clothes are worn. She eyes the little boy with a mix of wariness and not-quite suspicion. Then the little boy reaches into his bag and pulls out one of packs of Twinkies. He opens it and just as he is about to put it in his mouth, he stops, and turns to the woman at the other end of the bench, handing her one of the cakes. She breaks into a beatific smile as they share their sweets on the park bench. Then, he breaks out the apple juice, handing one bottle to her. The two tap bottles, toasting each other, and again she breaks into a broad smile. When it is time to go, the little boy and the woman embrace.

As he comes back into his home, his mother smiles at him and asks, "Did you find him?"

The boy replies, "God is a woman, mom, and she has the most beautiful smile."

The scene then flips to the woman. She is walking down the sidewalk carrying her bags, and she is beaming. As she sits down next to an elderly woman on the curb, the other woman asks, "Why are you in such a good mood?"

The smiling woman replies, "I just ate Twinkies in the park with God... He's much younger than I expected!"

Where does this story get the shine of good news? What *exactly* is it about it that warms our hearts, or in some way makes us pause and think good thoughts?

I am going to hazard a guess that it affirms something about humanity that we want to believe is true.

At a fairly basic level, we want folks to be honest, and we want folks to be – whether across the park bench or across the boardroom - well: *Good*.

One of the great affirmations of humanity that we encounter in scripture is the phrase we read this morning, that we are *fearfully and wonderfully made*.

You and I have the potential for great kindness and generosity.

There are, in you and in me, fertile places for the seeds of kindness and generosity to take root. It is at times as simple as the exchange of a look – returning eye-contact, acknowledging our shared humanity in gestures like, for instance, sharing a Twinkie.

There are myriad ways that we can spread the seeds of kindness and find in ourselves the fruits that grow from such good seeds... I wonder if that was what Jesus meant when he preached about good seeds being flung out into the world – reminding us that all that is good, all that is kind and generous, proceeds from the gracious abundance of God – I read those words of Jesus and I am reminded of the words of Richard Wilbur, *the world's fullness is not made, but found. Life hungers to abound, and pour out its plenty for such as you.*¹

Perhaps that is the root of Pope Francis's admonition to generosity – you may recall his teaching on giving to those who beg. “Speaking to the magazine *Scarp de'Tenis*, which means Tennis Shoes, a monthly for and about the homeless and marginalized, the pope said that giving something to someone in need is “always right.”

But what if someone uses the money for, say, a glass of wine? (A perfectly Milanese question.) His answer: If “a glass of wine is the only happiness he has in life, that's O.K. Instead, ask yourself, what do *you* do on the sly? What ‘happiness’ do you seek in secret?”

Another way to look at it, he said, is to recognize how you are the “luckier” one, with a home, a spouse and children, and then ask why your responsibility to help should be pushed onto someone else.

Then he posed a greater challenge. He said the way of giving is as important as the gift. You should not simply drop a bill into a cup and walk away. You must stop, look the person in the eyes, and touch his or her hands.”²

Truly the Pope's words capture the heart of looking at the other and seeing the good work of God: fearfully and wonderfully made, the seeds of God's goodness spread about with reckless abandon. And I understand that such an approach means running at odds at what we have been told about giving, perhaps what we ourselves believe about giving – it is risky; the

¹ Richard Wilbur, *A Wedding Toast*, in *Divine Inspirations*, Atwan, Dardess and Rosenthal, eds. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998) p113

² *The Pope on Panhandling: Give Without Worry* By [THE EDITORIAL BOARD](#), MARCH 3, 2017

odds of being taken advantage of are high. And yet, still kindness and generosity are what is called for from us – not withdrawal and distance. Even if that risks the possibility of being *used*.

It puts me in mind of the time when C.S. Lewis was walking down the streets of Oxford and a beggar asked him for money. He gave the man a few coins and continued on his way. His companion reacted with horror: “Professor Lewis, surely you know that he is only going to spend that money on liquor and cigarettes!”

The story goes that Lewis paused and replied, “Well, that’s all I was going to spend it on.”

Generosity, kindness – they are the building blocks of our humanity. They are pieces by which God knits us together so that we *are* fearfully and wonderfully made.

But what about when it doesn’t work out that way? What about those moments when we encounter what we might be tempted to quote Jesus and call *bad seed*?

He doesn’t mean the people, mind you – Jesus has a soft spot for sinners – but the actions: the attitudes, the assumptions, the demeaning of humanity. What about then?

I’ve never forgotten a time I went to buy pork chops one time in Atlanta, and everything you’ve heard about Atlanta drivers is true. I’ve seen demolition derbies that are more orderly than the Publix parking lot.

I pulled in and this van came barreling toward me, going the wrong way down the line of cars. I slammed on my brakes, and I veered my car off to the right. The van driver slammed on his brakes and no harm was done. Then the driver rolled down his window and mouthed an apology to me and motioned for me to roll my window down.

He said to me, “I’ve moved here from Alabama and I can’t find work – I need to feed my three little boys – I’ll give you my tools, just please, will you buy me some groceries?”

I couldn’t say no.

“Come on into Publix with me and let’s see what we can do.”

He replied, “Can we go to Kroger, the Publix manager won’t let me back in? That’s why I was driving so fast.”

We went around the corner to the Kroger, and he picked up some milk and cereal, a gallon of detergent, and some hotdogs and buns and yes, I threw in a pack of Twinkies for the boys. I paid, he thanked me for the groceries, I gave him the name of a social services agency the church supported, wished him luck, and went back to get my pork chops.

I was recounting this story to a church committee later, to underscore the need for what we do, and a member interrupted me.

He asked, “Did he drive up to you really fast and slam on the brakes?”

“Yes.”

“Did he tell you he was from Alabama and he had three boys to feed and offer you his tools?”

“Yes.”

“He does that at the Starbucks too.”

It is so easy to make someone else’s suffering about yourself, and I confess that moment, I thought such thoughts as Anne Lamott says would make Jesus want to drink gin straight from the cat dish. This is not the sort of moment that leaves one waxing poetical about the nature of humankind as *fearfully and wonderfully made*.

A different set of adjectives springs to mind, if we are to allow ourselves to think uncharitable thoughts.

It’s the sort of moment that makes one want to take *the wings of the morning and settle in the farthest limits of the sea*.

There are some moments when you just need a break from the humanity.

But a break from the humanity also means a break from God.

Do you know what the *wings of the morning* are?

They are the rays of sunlight that bounce off the clouds as the sun is rising, heralding the new day. The ancient Israelites may not have had our technology, but they had poetry and metaphor to match anyone – they knew that nothing travels faster and further than *light*.

To take the wings of the morning is a metaphor for getting the heck out of dodge.

And do you remember what the limits of the sea represent in the Bible?

The sea is the dwelling place of *Leviathan*. The sea was where Jonah walked the plank while running from God. The sea is that which separates the lands that are occupied by the clean and those occupied by the *haram* in the Gospels.

To take the wings of the morning and settle in the farthest limits of the sea is to do whatever it takes to cut yourself off from humanity and from God...

I hope that’s not an appealing option, but I know sometimes it is.

God won’t accept that outcome.

When the Psalmist can think of no more complete manner of escaping from God and humanity – the humanity for which God made us, fearfully and wonderfully, finally the psalmist acknowledges that resistance is futile.

God simply will not go away.

And God simply will not allow us to throw others away.

Wheat and tares, together sown. Good seeds and bad seeds, good deeds and bad deeds – don't be too quick to assign virtue or vice – it is God who is the judge.

Let's not get in the habit of identifying the wheat and the weeds – in plain truth, it's way too easy to get on the wrong side of the Roundup when we do that.

Instead look inward – there is nowhere God cannot and will not go with us and for us – let us look inward and tend the garden there a bit.

And remember this: *even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.