

“The Strange Joy of Close Reading”
Worship Theme: *Putting Flesh on the Bones of Faith*
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March 14, 2010

This week I got a Song Sparrow. I have recently taken up birding, and after a couple unsuccessful solo trips, I asked a few local birding experts if they would take me out and show me what my untrained eyes were missing. And Monday I got a Song Sparrow. It is not the rarest of birds, no Smooth-billed Ani or White-tailed Ptarmigan, but it is at least a little less ubiquitous than the flocks of Savannah Sparrows which dot the path at La Chua trail or the plague of Robins which has descended on Gainesville in recent weeks. The Song Sparrow was a good find for my second real outing, and though I was excited to see it, I was helpless to identify it.

Luckily, my guides began searching through the Sibley’s Guide to Birds and peppering me with questions, “What was the shape of its beak? What color were its eyes? Did it have a rufous underbelly?” I stammered out a not-very-helpful, “It looked kind of bluish to me.” It turns out “bluish” is not diagnostic for any sparrow, and on further inspection the bird was gray and brown. As the little bird hopped in and out of the underbrush my guides checked the size, and shape and color, and beak and belly and eyes and legs and wings and finally made the call that it was in fact a Song Sparrow. I, of course, beamed with pride to check it off the list in the back of my birds of Florida.

As an extreme novice, I would paraphrase the Nabokov quote at the top of your bulletin, and say that birding is about noticing and fondling the details. Sparrows are an especial challenge, and even many birders lump them all together as “LBJ”s, that is, “Little Brown Jobs.” Noticing tiny nuances of shape, color, and behavior requires a tremendous amount of patience, expertise, and passion, but from my first forays into birding I can also imagine that making a difficult ID can give one a lot of joy and that the practice of birding and of attending to those details can transform the way one sees the world.

And, seeing as I’m now an ordained minister, it reminded me of the bible. In thinking about our worship theme, “putting flesh on the bones of faith,” it struck me that the practice which has added the most flesh to my spiritual physique is the practice of close reading in the Bible. Now, despite the jokes around the office this week, close reading does not simply mean burying your face in the book; it is a term from literary criticism which has its roots in the study of the bible in 18th century Germany. Close reading, as its name suggests, is the practice of reading slowly and carefully, mining each word or image for its full, rich meaning. Chances are, if you’ve been to high school you’ve done it at some point, dissecting a poem to a degree of detail you either found annoying or exciting. Close reading favors the particulars, it privileges the details and finds in them the keys to unlock the whole. It is a discipline. It means a commitment to really reading the words that are on the page and not simply getting the gist of things, and that’s the reason it’s been so helpful in my spiritual development.

I have always had a pretty bare bones understanding of the bible. I know many of the stories, but by no means all, and I have some idea where to find them but can’t quote chapter and verse. In this, I think I’m probably like a lot of other people. At every

church of which I've been a part many if not most folks are somewhat sheepish about their biblical knowledge, and most assume that everyone else is secretly a bible scholar. I've heard people say, "I grew up Catholic, so I don't know the bible," and "I grew up Methodist, so I don't know the Bible," and "I grew up UCC, so I don't know the bible," or "I didn't grow up in the church, so I don't know the bible." So, the secret is out, many of us don't know the bible in whatever way we think "they" would want us to (whoever "they" are). But I will share another secret with you: nothing has made my reading of the bible more enjoyable or successful than coming to it with admitted ignorance. In fact, I think this is the perfect way to embark upon the practice of close reading.

The proof of this for me is how difficult I find it to preach on a familiar passage of scripture, or even to read it. Give me a section of Second Chronicles to tackle, and I can really sink my teeth into it. Because I really don't know much about Second Chronicles. Maybe you are the same way; maybe you are wondering if I just made that book up. And that is exactly why I can enjoy reading it, digging into it with fresh eyes. But give me Genesis, and I start skimming. Creation, Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, names, names, Noah's Ark, names, tower of Babel, names, Abraham and Sarah, Abraham and Isaac, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Esau, Jacob and Leah, Jacob and Rachel, Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. I know Genesis. Or at least I think I do, and that presumed mastery is much more dangerous to putting flesh on the bones of faith, than unfamiliarity.

That's because, when I approach a passage believing I already know what it says, it can't possibly say anything different to me. Often when I'm preaching on a familiar passage I come in thinking I know what the sermon is already, but when I'm faithful in my preparation and I read closely, I always turn out to be wrong. When I am willing to entertain the possibility that I don't know what is going on in the story, I find something new, and it is always something more interesting, more challenging, and much, much stranger than I had assumed was there.

This was certainly the case as Andy and I prepared to do our reading of the Gospel of Matthew, and I went through the book over and over with the holy task of looking for places to insert jokes. You might think, if a close reading of the bible makes it more interesting, why add jokes, but I think the most successful jokes were ones that pointed up the strangeness and humor already in the story which one only discovers when reading closely. One has to be reading closely to find the humor in the bible or in anything, because humor deals with specifics. So, for instance, I can read over and over again that Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard, but it just sounds like Biblish. I'm used to hearing it. It wasn't until Andy found a picture on the internet of Jesus holding a six-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon that the shock of that image came across to me. For me, that shock is the shock that the original readers felt when this man who claimed to be the most holy son of god did not fast or abstain from alcohol like other holy people of his time, but ate and drank and hung out with the rabble. I couldn't hear that shock, because I thought I already knew the story, and there wasn't really anything shocking in there.

Of course it is not just laughs that a close reading offers. The drama, and even the meaning of the story can be transformed when one reads closely. I chose this morning's scripture because it is a passage which changed drastically for me when I read it closely. I was assigned to preach this story as my first sermon in seminary, and

for a long time I had no idea what I would say. I had heard this passage many times and assumed they were just two nice healing stories with nothing very interesting to say about them.

It wasn't until I decided to write the passage down word for word that I began to notice things which made me read it differently. One of the weird lines which I had read a dozen times without noticing was when the leader of the synagogue comes to tell Jesus his daughter is dying and the text says that he "fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly." Repeatedly. That finally struck me as pretty darn strange. Why would Jairus have to beg Jesus repeatedly when his daughter is at the point of death? For me it changed the entire story. The piece in the middle no longer felt like a bonus healing but an interruption, a preemption. For some reason this other woman gets healed first. And even though the story says the woman is healed as soon as she touches him, Jesus takes more time to find her in the crowd and waits for her to come forward just to confirm that she is healed. Meanwhile a little girl is dying, and in the middle of the story she dies. Jesus seems to take his sweet time and fails to heal her before she dies, and that is a very different story than the one I assumed I was reading.

Other words and images also came forward: Why did Mark include the Semitic expression, "Talitha cum?" Why link these stories? Why associate each woman with the number 12? And why does he bother to mention that Jesus tells the parents to get the girl something to eat? I don't intend to answer any of these questions for you this morning, but as I read closely you can see how my questions multiplied and the story became much stranger but also much more interesting.

And this is why I love close reading, because I really do believe that the bible is a beautiful, dramatic, and life-giving library and that it only becomes boring and meaningless, or worse, becomes a weapon, when one assumes that one knows what it says. I love close reading because it shows me how truly weird the books of the bible are. It fills me with questions; it pushes me to try to make sense of those questions, and in that process I grow.

And that goes for a lot of things beyond reading the Bible, because what I'm really talking about in the practice of close reading is the practice of honesty. Reading the words that are there and reading them closely and carefully is a practice of honesty within one's self. It is a willingness to read the words and try to understand them knowing full well that they may not say what one believes they say or wants them to say.

Growth begins with honesty. Putting flesh on the bones of faith, or on the bones of a career, or a marriage, friendship, parenthood, recovery all begin with honesty. Any area in which one is hoping to grow, requires the practice of honesty because without an honest assessment of who we are and where we stand we cannot know in which direction to grow. And growth takes continued honesty because honesty tears down the barriers to growth that we can construct, like that barrier of mastery I always run up against with familiar passages. When one wants to master something, to win, to be right, one can construct barriers to honesty and to growth.

If you want to win at baseball, you can cork the bat, grease the ball, or pay the ump, but none of these really make you a better player. If you want to become a better baseball player, you have to work hard within the rules of the game. Likewise, in marriage it is easy to win every fight by simply insisting that you are always right, I've

tried it. But it doesn't make you a better spouse. For a marriage to grow, both partners have to be willing to listen more closely and entertain the possibility that they are wrong. Likewise, if you want the bible to agree with you 100% of the time, it is easy enough. Just read it as if it already does. But if you are looking to put flesh on spiritual bones you have to read differently. There are lots of ways to win, but only one way to grow.

My birding guides talked about how easy it is, when one is looking for a rare bird, to insert certain details that may or may not be there. One wants to see the tell-tale patch of green which separates the everyday bird from the extraordinary find, but to become a better birder, one has to check the wings, and the legs, and the beak, and the underbelly. The practice of honesty, whether in birding, or bible, or baseball makes success more difficult, but it also makes growth possible. And the reward of honesty is that it makes the world far more interesting, more challenging, and much, much stranger than the one which I thought I had already mastered. Honesty transforms the way we see the world in the same way that birding has begun to transform the prairie for me.

Suddenly the observation deck is no longer a point way past most of the good gator sightings; it is the Mecca toward which the trip moves, the vantage point from which I might catch a bald eagle, or a flock of glossy ibis, or one of only 500 whooping cranes in existence. Suddenly, the flock in the distance is no longer composed of generic ducks but of Blue-Winged Teals, and Mottled Ducks, and Northern Shovelers. Suddenly the dry brown landscape is alive with color and movement and flashes of tiny, bluish, sparrows.