

Readings, Prayer, and Sermon
Sunday March 19, 2017
Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini
All Souls Church, New York City

The First Reading

Letters (4 selections) to his brother Theo

Vincent Van Gogh, 1880-1890

1. God, perhaps, really begins, when we say the word in the spirit of the famous prayer of the unbeliever, "O God, there is no God!" For me, the god of the clergy is dead as a doornail. But am I an atheist? I just know the clergy consider me one.

(Letter 164)

2. I just think that the best way to know God is to love much. Love a friend, a spouse, something, whatever you like. But you must love with intelligence, with strength, with lofty and intimate compassion. One must always try to know things in a deeper way, better and more.

(Letter 133)

3. I have a *terrible lucidity* at moments, these (spring) days when nature is so beautiful. I am hardly conscious of myself anymore. My paintings come to me as if I were in a dream. (Letter 543)

4. Did you ever read King Lear? Oh, never mind.

I think I won't really urge you to go out and read yet another book or drama, seeing that I myself, after reading them for a period, have to go outdoors and look at a blade of grass, the branch of a fir tree, or an ear of wheat, in order to calm down. So if you want to do as I do, go outside and look at the red and white poppies with their bluish leaves, their buds swaying on graceful bent stems. (Letter W 13)

The Second Reading

Everything

Mary Oliver, 1990

Written on the 100th anniversary of Van Gogh's Death.

An excerpt

No doubt in Holland when Van Gogh was a boy
there were swans drifting over the green sea
of the meadows, and no doubt
on some warm afternoon he lay down
and watched them,
and almost thought: this is everything.

What drove him to get up
and look further
is what saves the world,
even as it breaks hearts.
In the mines where he preached,
where he studied tenderness,
there were only men,
all of them streaked with dust.

For years he would reach toward
the darkness...

But...this is what would finish him:
not the gloom, which was only terrible,
but those last yellow fields,
where clearly nothing in the world mattered,
or ever would, but the insensible light.

Prayer Anticipatory Benedicite for the Equinox

All of you splendid natural forces
bring the arriving spring, bring me also
to myself.
You early daffodils, you yellow slow-motion fireworks in late snow,
dazzle me.
You roses, you that bud as a call to each
of us to blossom as well ourselves,
astonish me.
You leftover banks of late winter snow,
chasten my unrealistic expectations.
You starry night, you glittering opals strewn across night's dark wool,
spin and whirl also within me.
You slowly greening meadows in the great Park, sweeten the air and
teach me, teach all of us, how to breathe again in this breathless and
strange era of ours.
You man on the street corner talking to yourself, beguile me no less than
a rose.

You woman recovering slowly from deep hurt, move me no less than the spiraling stars in the sky.
You children without either shoes or good guidance, be my daily teachers.
All you puzzle pieces of the world,
the beautiful *and* the broken;
the budding and the fretful;
join together now, to bestow to us all the larger, less parochial view.
You silence in the infinite universe that binds everything...winter to spring, snow to rose, person to every other person, together forever,
silence me now, silence us all, for a time....

(silence for a time)

Sermon

A Spiritual Teacher for Our Present Days

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Fifteen years ago today, I was in Amsterdam, in Europe. I was in a pulpit much higher than this one preaching an Ordination Sermon for Hans LeGrande. Hans, a Dutch physicist, had attended the congregation I served in Hayward California, while working for 2 years at the nearby Livermore Laboratory. Although he was raised a Remonstrant, (a liberal Protestant group,) in Nederland, our Unitarian Universalist church in Hayward really called to him.

So when he returned home, he decided to pursue the Unitarian ministry in Europe. He eventually graduated from a ministerial school in England, and so one day, called me up to see if I would come over to preach his ordination sermon.

So there I was, preaching a sermon in high pulpit of a beautiful old wooden church along one of the fabled canals.

When the service ended, most of us walked to a nearby Japanese restaurant for some supper. We laughed, told stories, and had a great time.

But just as we were finishing our meals, local police officers burst into the restaurant and loudly ordered us to leave the place at once. Seems some serious soccer rioting was moving down the street in our direction! As we scurried down the alley, I could see tear gas clouds rolling our way, illuminated by blinding red flares. Police sirens blared. I was horrified to see some truly awful anti-Jewish signs held aloft by rioters, who were clearly drunk on Heineken from the nearby brewery.

Fortunately, we all got to safety and we each dispersed, shaken. Hans and I took the next train out to the charming suburb of Hilversum where he lived. Not long after we got to his house, we found out that Pym Fortuin, a controversial anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant candidate for public office, had just been assassinated only two blocks away, another jarring shock to close the day.

In the span of an afternoon, my life threaded through joy, then violence, then extreme bigotry and finally, an assassination. I gained a shakier perspective on the preaching I had just offered Hans a few hours before. After all, we had not ordained Hans to just to give sermons, but to courageously live out a life of truthfulness, love and self-awareness within *this* very world we had just witnessed: this world of antagonism, hatred, bigotry, lies, and upheaval along the canals in Amsterdam. A world, of course, which many of us are *still* experiencing right now, in our own nation, 15 years later.

In my sermon for Hans, (a European, not a North American, after all,) I reminded him of his own great progressive Dutch tradition instead of our North American ones. I mentioned the radical Beguines of the Middle Ages, the influential heretic Spinoza, and the 17th century reformer Dirck Coornhert. And finally, I reminded Hans that Vincent Van Gogh had, like him, been a minister too. But I told him that Van Gogh had *left* the ministry *for the exact same reason Hans was being ordained to it*.

I promise I'll unpack that riddle a bit later.

As an educated Dutch citizen, Hans knew about Van Gogh's life: how he preached sermons, in English, at Methodist chapels in England. He knew the young red-headed cleric was then sent as an evangelist to the destitute, dust-covered coal miners in the Borinage area of Belgium. But this ministry of Van Gogh to the miserable poor is not commonly known in the States.

Oh, sure. Everyone has *heard* about Van Gogh. He's famous! His paintings are reproduced on coffee cups, beach towels, t shirts and coasters. He is everywhere. But his fame is more fiscal than artistic to many. Even though he sold only one painting during his lifetime, now that he's dead, his work sells for preposterous sums. His *Sunflowers* alone went for a tidy \$39 million.

And of the rest of his life, I suppose almost everyone knows the story about how he cut off his ear. Sadly, most people I asked about this seem to think he did it out of puppy-dog love for some prostitute. But that's simply not true. He had a very severe emotional breakdown when his brother, Theo, who financially supported him, announced his upcoming marriage in a letter. And the letter arrived *at the exact same moment* the painter Gauguin, his room-mate, announced he was leaving the town of Arles, and moving back to Paris. Feeling totally abandoned, Vincent raged, and actually fought physically with Gauguin. Newer historical research suggests that

Gauguin himself did the bloody deed in the context of their violent fight. In any case, he wasn't doing it for anyone...he just lost it.

Well, frankly, it pains me when people suggest to me that Van Gogh, because of such outbursts, was a "typical artist," by which they rudely mean "eccentric and whacky".

This is nonsense. Look. Vincent had red hair, a nice beard, a fondness for wine and absinthe and sex, and a passion for painting outdoors. He had episodes of depression and rage, and undoubted skills in both artistic composition, and writing. Vincent Van Gogh was first and foremost simply a human being, with unique details, *just like everyone else in this room.*

It's Vincent Van Gogh, the human being, which enflames my heart this morning, not some representative of a dismissive category invented by people who do not want to engage humanity unless they can control it.

So this morning I want to speak of Van Gogh as a human being who has more to say to us than merely offering himself as 39 million dollar art investment.

So this morning I want to lift up Van Gogh for our spiritual benefit. First, I want to present him as a person struggling with depression. Secondly, I want to lift up Van Gogh as a spiritual exemplar. And third, I want to present Van Gogh as a better theologian than most others who say they are theologians.

First, Van Gogh as a person struggling with depression.

Throughout much of his life, the man suffered from severe mental compromise. His doctors called him an epileptic, but there is no real evidence of that that I can find. And, he was treated much of his life for depression. The "rest cures" of his day treated his impulsive, angry outbursts.

In the end, however, it doesn't matter what particular diagnosis we moderns make. Van Gogh was clearly suffering from something physical. Debate as we want, that's the most we can be sure of. Moreover, he used to wet his brushes out in the field by dipping them in the saliva of his own mouth...especially his yellow pigment, which had a high content of lead...long before we knew about lead poisoning.

Now both bi-polar depression and lead poisoning are realities in the brain.

They are *not* character flaws.

They are not "typical artistic temperaments."

They are not behavioral responses to inept parenting.

To say so is to embrace the same Calvinist sin-and-salvation theology his parents fed him when he was a child. This same theology has overshadowed the Northern European part of United States culture for hundreds of year. Even people who claim to have rejected the stern religion of their parents and tossed God still clutch on to a version of it. The sin-and-salvation theory of Northern European Calvinism is the idea that social and financial success is a sign of your goodness, whereas poverty, or depression results from your stubborn refusal to try hard enough, your laziness, your irresponsibility and resistance to character development. In this philosophy, people with illness in their brains are treated differently from those who suffer from cancer and even from common colds. For the “lift yourself up by your own bootstraps crowd,” mental illness is really not a physical thing at all. It’s a failure of faith. And this religious attitude prevails among the leadership of many supposedly secular health insurance companies, as well as in the present attempt by Congress to change health care access.

Worse, this idea is shored up by popular religious figures like Rev. Pat Robertson on his daily TV show and thousands of mega-church pastors around the country. Robertson, for example, tells his audience that their depression, anxiety and even their cancers are caused by demons from hell. Then he tells them that God has given *him, Pat Robertson*, the power to cast demons out. He then does so, by aiming his hands at the camera, scrunching up his face, and shouting at the demons on the other side of the lens. I’m sorry, but this is chicanery at its worst. It’s a horrifying example of the spiritual bankruptcy of so much American religious...and now our secular health life.

Every one of us is a physical being in a physical universe. And please, I am not being reductionist here. The essential mystery of human persons goes without saying. But because we *are* physical beings, we have each been given, by genetics mostly, a hand of cards to play. Some of us, you see, are prone to certain illnesses because of our family history, whether it’s depression, Alzheimer’s, or heart disease. Others have allergies to the very beautiful flowers Van Gogh used to paint. Some of us can’t touch wheat, or shellfish. Others are allergic to alcohol. *None of these realities makes any one of us inferior to anyone else. And none of these realities makes any of us cursed by God.* For that God, who viciously punishes, as Van Gogh said in one of his letters, the “God of the clergy,” like Pat Robertson for example, is most assuredly dead.

But this line of argument does bring me to my second point, Van Gogh as a spiritual exemplar. Van Gogh is an exemplar of what it means to live your own life, not to let others live it for you. Van Gogh played the difficult deck he was given beautifully. He did not try to paint like other artists, Cezanne or Monet or Gauguin. He wanted to only paint like himself. He did not judge himself against others, for he was playing his own cards, not theirs. He painted from his passionate center and did not bend to popular opinion or assume that if people were not buying his paintings, his paintings must be terrible. He knew they were good. The artist painted what he saw and for him, creation was alive and glowing. He painted with the passion of his

physical body, seeing the world as his own physical eyes saw the world – not static, not dead, but reaching out to him in heartrending and healing beauty.

Van Gogh did all these things between bouts of depression and rest cures. He got up from every disappointment and down-time and painted all that is beautiful again and again. He put it this way in a letter to his brother Theo; he wrote that he experienced a “terrible lucidity” standing in those sunlit meadows, when he felt whole, and part-and- parcel of the bright beauty all around him.

Even if he had just a few moments of energy, he would use them...he would leave his bed to paint for a bit; and if he was too weak to walk further, he would stop and paint the red bed itself. He revered the untamed natural world. And despite his outbursts, he did not force any bitterness he could have carried with him from his rigid religious youth onto the world. Instead, he took out his pigments and found the “drooping red and white poppies with their bluish leaves,” as he wrote in his letter to Theo. And thus, he lived his life fully, not resentfully. He lived fully – *even though he struggled with depression.*

Most movingly, to me at least, Vincent did not take his own life as his earlier biographies asserted. We know that now. In the town where he died, local neighborhood teens vacationing down in Arles from Paris got caught up playing “cowboy.” They had all thrilled to *the Buffalo Bill and Annie Oakley* show from America that was the talk of the town. These same kids also used to make fun of Vincent as he trod off to the fields to paint; clacking with boxes of paints and brushes, and then often teased him as he came back to town, his lips yellowed with paint.

One of the boys, a 16 year old named René Secrétan whose older brother was actually a friend of Vincent’s, often wore a cowboy hat and swaggered around town. He carried a small pistol with him, and when he met Vincent coming in from the fields with his paints and canvasses, he apparently pretended to shoot Vincent. But Vincent was, in fact, shot, and fell to the ground. René ran away when he saw what he had done. In a panic, he disposed of the paints and canvasses.

But when Vincent himself, got up and faltered home at last, his stomach bleeding, the doctors unable to do anything, he claimed to have shot himself even though the attending doctors knew that could not possibly be true from the angle of the shot. Vincent’s heart, however, was with the young man whose life would be ruined forever, he knew, with a charge of killing, even though there is no evidence to think he did it deliberately.

So the artist, knowing he was going to die, concealed the truth out of compassion for René. The family and doctors knew he had not shot himself, but Van Gogh was adamant that he had... for the sake of another man’s life. This moved me deeply when I first discovered this truth. And it was typical of the man...all of his life,

despite his own troubles, his heart was always moved by those who suffered more than he did. And he always, always, tried to help them in some way.

All of which leads me neatly to lifting up Van Gogh as a theologian. The church board that kicked him out of his ministerial work thought he was an atheist. And he *did* say, as you heard earlier, that God could only “begin” for him when he *denied* divinity first.

But *he* didn’t call himself an atheist. *They* did. So why did they eject him from his calling?

Because Van Gogh took the gospels seriously. “Blest are the poor,” said the Galilean. Vincent saw the full humanity of the poor miners he served. He *felt* for their degrading condition, their poverty and misery. He couldn’t honestly promise them heaven after they died until he could see a way to bring them the bright flowering fields of heaven in this life. He realized he needed to get up from that fallow Calvinist field and move onto brighter pastures. As Mary Oliver put it in her touching poem:

*What drove him to get up and look further
is what saves the world, even as it breaks hearts. In the mines where he preached,
where he studied tenderness, there were only men, all of them streaked with dust.
For years he would reach toward the darkness.
And this is what would finish him:
not the gloom, which was only terrible,
but those last yellow fields, where clearly nothing in the world mattered, or ever
would, but the insensible light.*

That light, that beauty, was for Van Gogh the deeper meaning behind the “God” he had given up, that punishing God, that judging God. Instead, Van Gogh’s theology changed from stern to compassion, from dust to light, as his heart broke before the plight of the miners. He went from a God who arbitrarily punishes toward “something higher,” an unnamable God who *is* Love and even the light that first painted the colorful world around him.

But this Love was not just some feel-good symbol...it was the real love between human beings; spouse to spouse or friend to friend, minister to miners, or even, of human beings for beautiful things, like roses or sunflowers. He called this God, “love, with intelligence...strength, (and) lofty and intimate compassion.” And he defines what he means by *intelligent* love. “One must always try to know things in a deeper way,” he wrote, “better and more.”

In other words, Van Gogh left the ministry and the god of the clergy for a different kind of ministry...the ministry of the insensate light, the ministry of love in a loveless world where the miners are barely human beings and the poor are marginalized and blamed just as surely as the mentally ill are marginalized and blamed. Within the sanctuary of this new ministry, he found a whole fresh world of

spring flowers where he could feel those sudden bouts of “terrible lucidity”...clarity that, despite his limiting depression, the world was not a mistake, not an error, but a companion, an intimacy.

What I said to Hans in his ordination sermon was that he was coming into the ministry for the exact same reason Van Gogh was kicked out. What does this strange riddle mean? I say Van Gogh was kicked out of the ministry for not towing the line of sin-and-salvation theology. He left the pulpit because he saw the humanity of the sooty miners and loved them. He could not see how preaching hell to those already in hell was a form of love. Van Gogh could not see the “innate depravity” in these men that Calvin once preached. All he could see was the same “insensate light” in the human soul that he saw in the fields of dancing wheat outside his cottage at Arles.

Hans was coming into the ministry from a secular world where seeing with love’s light was replaced with data and information. And because Hans could see the glow in human beings no matter their physical realities, and despite their conflicting ways of talking about the mystery of love or God; because Hans could see the depth, not the surface, I say he was ordained for the same reason Van Gogh was kicked out of his ministry. Van Gogh and Hans both were called toward the deeps of this life, the reality of suffering in the world, the real problems of real people. One left his pulpit to paint in the beautiful fields, the other entered the pulpit in a public ceremony, from there to live out the light of love in a beautiful yet very broken world.

Van Gogh said, “what is done in love, is done well.”

So in summary, I have found that Vincent’s story is a constant reminder for me to see that every person is just that, a person, no matter their brain chemistry, no matter their physical differences. And I have seen in Vincent a spiritual exemplar... in a tough world, you still have to live your own life, not someone else’s life. And finally, theologian Van Gogh urges me to begin to shy away from the straightjackets *of both belief and unbelief*. Instead, he quietly takes me by the hand, to leave the pulpit, walk outside, and gaze instead... with camera, brush or simple sigh, at a perfectly beautiful and saving rose budding in the pastel air of coming spring.