

Forming: A Peculiar Language

Exodus 3:1-15

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A few weeks ago, I attended a political forum at which a number of candidates for public office in this election season were gathered to speak. It was a lively occasion, as, one by one, candidates rose to give their pitch to the public, and to respond to questions from the moderator of that forum. When they had finished, various persons from the audience came to the microphone to ask a host of different questions.

One particular questioner prompted a groan from the audience by asking a suspicious question: "Would each one of you please say a word or two about your relationship with God?" Almost immediately, one of the candidates stood up and stopped it all with these words: "I am a Christian, but that has nothing to do with the issues of this particular campaign." And, with that potentially awkward and divisive question thus laid to rest, many in the audience applauded, some of the other candidates applauded, and I applauded; and the forum moved on to another question.

You can understand why we all applauded, can't you? I mean, who knows what mischief can come from such a question? People are always calling upon religion and politics to mix in dangerous ways. And whatever a politician's faith may be, some will find it too permissively liberal or too oppressively conservative. We had no idea what lay in the mind of that questioner as he sought to probe the faith experience of those candidates, but we suspected some dark motive; so our applause was, in part at least, the applause of relief that the potentially tricky question was so quickly and effectively disarmed and dismissed.

Maybe in part it was also the sympathetic applause of people who know that however open a public servant's life has to be, there are some things that ought to still be private and beyond our nosy scrutiny. Religion is one of those things, we reason. So the applause was also, perhaps, our vote for a measure of personal privacy for those whose lives are, otherwise, not private enough.

Long after that forum has come and gone, however, I'm still troubled over perhaps another reason for that applause, perhaps another reason for my own applause, at least. Can you guess what it is? It's just the embarrassment that we often feel when using the language of faith in some other place than church, and at some other time than an eleven o'clock worship service. We were all applauding in part, I think, because we would have been embarrassed to use, or to insist that others use so unapologetically in a setting like that, the language of faith. For we live in a world which teaches us in ways both subtle and not-so-subtle that there's something very wrong about using that kind of language in public.

Now it may not always have been this way. In fact, I grew up in a time in which it was possible, I think—at least in the Lowcountry of South Carolina during the early sixties—to drink the water and become a Protestant. There were invocations at football games, and devotions every morning in public school, and discussion among kids on the playground about religion. One hardly had to go to church to get religion! There were insurance salesmen who, before they finished writing your life insurance policy, would say, "By the way, are you saved?" There were milkmen and mail carriers who, if they discovered that you were new in town, would invite you to church.

There was “the obituary column of the air” on local radio stations, during which, with a Hammond organ playing softly in the background, radio announcers would talk assuringly about “So-and-so dying and going to Heaven to be with the Lord”; and, just in general, there was a sense that religion, at least a certain form or residue of religion, was thick in the atmosphere, and that a person could become a practitioner of it just by breathing deeply, or by drinking the water.

But that was then, and this is now. And, I suppose, we’re better off except for the embarrassment. It’s the embarrassment that muzzles us too often these days.

William F. Buckley said that it is now possible, at any elegant dinner party in America, to discuss whatever you want to discuss. You can talk about your party affiliations, you can talk about sex, you can talk about your therapy. But mention God twice in one evening, said Buckley, and you will not be invited back.¹

Yale Law professor Stephen L. Carter, author of *The Culture of Disbelief*, has made the same point. Carter describes our culture as being so deeply skeptical that it associates any religious language with that which is nonintellectual or unintelligent or right wing, thus creating an atmosphere in which, as Carter says, “...a lot of religious people *edit themselves* in conversation.”²

It’s that embarrassment!

Lacking confidence in the power of our story to effect that of which it speaks, we lose our nerve, and thus say nothing. We edit ourselves in conversation.

So I suggest that we need to recover a sense of what it means to form a certain language, the language of faith, and to speak that language without apology in the midst of the world and for the sake of the world. Or, to put it much more accurately, we need to recover a sense of what it means to be formed *by* a certain language. For we don’t need to invent a language of faith. The truth is that an ancient language, one which has been passed down from generation to generation, is already here and is already ours by inheritance.

Some of us struggle hard with the challenge and the opportunity to learn and to speak that ancient language. Every time we bring another baby to the baptismal font, we use that ancient language to remind ourselves that, even in the midst of a world which forgets and devalues too many people—that child, and every other child, is a Child of God! And God knows her name before she knows her name! Every time we break the bread and share the cup, we use this ancient language to remember that in spite of our world’s obsession with who’s “in” and who’s “out,” we’re living in another world in which everybody is a brother or a sister and has a front-row seat at the same banquet table.

Every time we serve soup to someone in the night shelter, we have a particularly vivid opportunity to ponder peculiar language about how Christ himself is present in the guise of a stranger.

Every time we feel the hot flame of outrage in the face of some injustice done in this city or in some other city—Mogadishu, or Moscow, or Managua—we get to ponder the city that dwells so vividly in biblical imagination, the city on a hill, whose builder and maker is God. We have the chance to wonder what impact that city might have on this and every other city.

Every time we enter a sanctuary on a Sunday morning, all too aware of those wars at the office, or that silence at home that you can cut with a knife, we get to feel that language of pardon wash over us with its redemptive and transforming power in such words as, “Friends, believe the Good News—In Jesus Christ you are forgiven.”

It’s peculiar language, but we need to learn that language, and to practice speaking

it with one another, and to teach it to our children. And not for its own sake. Never for its own sake. But because there's a larger story out there that takes what is peculiar about our language and makes it make sense. There's a story that lies there beneath our language, that makes our language intelligible, and that gives our language power.

We get a glimpse of this story in our Old Testament lesson for today. Moses was busy making himself useful on the surface of things—tending sheep, taking a wife, making a living, having a son, living out his days in much the same way that so many of us live out our days. Until one day, he encountered that larger story, that ongoing story of deliverance that weaves through all of time like an ancient river, overthrowing all of our other stories. In the midst of a life marked by ordinariness and predictability, Moses heard the call of God to let his life be lived out in an extraordinary, unpredictable way in faithful response to that larger story, that story of deliverance.

And the way he heard this call is interesting in itself. A bush burst into flame, the voice of God rang out to him, and Moses had the good sense to take his shoes off, because he knew in that moment that he was standing on holy ground. Something flamed up in his life, just like something begs to flame up in our lives with the message that everything bears the potential of holiness. Everything was transformed for him, and, before that encounter was over, Moses was starting to acquaint himself with a new language that would consume him for the rest of his life. This peculiar language, language that enabled him to envision all ground as holy ground, made sense because of that larger story, that ongoing story of deliverance!

It's that way with our faith language, peculiar as it is. There is an ongoing story of deliverance—from creation, through the wilderness, into the promised land, down to Bethlehem, born of Mary, off to Galilee, into Jerusalem, up to Calvary, crucifixion, empty tomb, Holy Spirit, church—that takes what is peculiar about our language and makes it make sense, that gives it power!

And to hear and absorb this story is to live in the world in a different way, with our shoes off in the presence of the purposes of God, as if all ground is holy ground!

I love the way Will Willimon, dean of the chapel at Duke University, has put it :

We must learn Christianity even as we learn a foreign language. The task of [speaking this language] is...to teach what would not be known before it is announced, to cultivate those insights...and that vocabulary with which Christians describe the world. [Speaking the language] is therefore always...[a matter of] destabilizing, beckoning, reconstructing the taken-for-granted world of the present. So much of Jesus' preaching, and the best of our own, is eschatological, an announcement of an end to the present order so that God can have room to make a new one.³

That's what's at stake when we learn and speak and pass on to others this peculiar, redemptive language.

When I think back to that candidate for office and that curious statement "I am a Christian, but that has nothing to do with the issues of this particular campaign," a response begins to form in my mind. If that first statement is true, and I believe that it is, then that second statement has to be false. Because being a Christian has everything to do with the way in which in every moment and in every place you and I and all of God's children go about the living of our lives! For the language that we speak in this place is not destined to be a secret language, but language that redeems the world!

Here at the end of this sermon, I am reminded of another political forum which I attended recently. It was the weekly Monday morning meeting of the Concerned Black Clergy, and all of us gathered in a banquet room at Paschal's munched on breakfast as a host of school board candidates stood at the rostrum, one by one, and summarized their platforms and positions and solicited support. Most of the candidates were compelling and credible, but one of them particularly stands out in my mind. She began by outlining her positions on various matters, and the crowd of us listened attentively enough, politely enough. But, at some point, it's hard to figure out exactly where, she moved in her speech from one sort of language to another. She shifted, at some critical point, from policies and positions to the story of Moses, the story that picks up where our Old Testament lesson leaves off. In one instant, we were all somewhere on page twenty-five of the Fulton County School Board budget. In the next instant, we were Israelites standing at the edge of the land of Canaan at the end of forty years of wandering.

"Now people," she said, and the crowd began to perk up and to respond, "Preach it, sister." "We're grateful to Moses," she said, "for getting us through the wilderness to this place."

"Amen!" the crowd shouted.

"But now we need some Joshuas who can lead us across the river into the Promised Land." And, there at the end of her speech as she sat down, the crowd erupted into applause and shouts of praise and even a spontaneous prayer or two. It was as if, at some point in the middle of her speech, someone had flipped a switch, thus suddenly transporting us from a meeting hall to church!

But that's what it's like, when we use this peculiar language of faith! There is no place under God where such language is not allowed or appropriate, where such language cannot work its redemptive, transforming miracle.

So let us practice this peculiar language which we are forming together, and which is forming us. Let us teach this language to our children, and let us get them to church regularly so they can hear and speak this language themselves and so they can someday be sustained by it. Let us tell them the marvelous stories of faith, and let us pray with them at meals and at bedtime and at the beginning of the day. Let us work on our own prayer life and devotional life. Let us worship and sing and act out this peculiar language. And let us speak it with one another, and—together—let us take this language out into the world. Let us live into this language so thoroughly, in fact, that the day will come when it lives thoroughly within us. Let us allow this language to convert us, our lives, our work, our relationships, our checkbooks, until all ground is holy ground; and, with the blessed name of God on our lips, we become, in the end, like a burning bush ourselves.

NOTES

¹ Quoted from Tom Long's sermon, "The Embarrassment of the Gospel."

² "Dispelling Political Myths on Religion," *Atlanta Journal/Constitution*, 16 October 1993.

³ William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 114.