

Feast of Enmegahboh – May 15, 2008
 Seabury Western Theological Seminary, Evanston

Poor Us

During the attacks on 9/11 the current bishop of Florida, Samuel Johnson Howard, who was then on the staff of Trinity Church, Wall Street, found himself in an office building in lower Manhattan with thirty other people or so, locked down. As they finally were allowed to leave the building, after the towers had come down, coming out on the street in clerical dress he says he was approached by almost everyone he met with requests for prayer and blessings, many of them asking him to hear their confessions. One fireman approached and asked him to hear his confession, and Samuel told him he would be happy to but wanted him to know that that he was an Episcopal priest. The fireman looked him in the eye and said, “Father, I don’t give a damn what you are.”

In times of intense crisis the details of the identities we so often use to define ourselves can seem to matter very little. Although scandalously important to ruling regimes, I suspect where the aid comes from is of very little consequence to a victim of the cyclone in Myanmar, or the terror of earthquake in China. Our own national mythology was put to shame by the racial and class identities that warped our response to the suffering of the city of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast – on the ground in those places need was and is simply need. Crises can lay bare the simple truth of who we are beyond labels and trappings. Crises can expose the essential longing and need at the heart of what it is to be human – the longing for connection, community, transcendence. There are no atheists in fox holes as we say. Crises of one kind or another form privileged places in our lives where our vulnerabilities leave us exposed – to one another and ultimately to God. And we do not have to look far for crisis, do we? Our church is said to be in crisis (God knows! It’s all the press – even and especially the church press – ever wants to talk about). This seminary is living through a kind of crisis. The economy is in crisis. We are participants in ongoing crises of trust in this country around our political process, racial divisions, access to health care and on and on. Iraq, Sudan, the Holy Land. The earth itself seems to be in the grip of an ecological crisis of unimaginable proportions. The consumerist world we have created leaves us in a perpetual crisis of always wanting more than we need or can have, stripping the earth bare and fouling it irreparably in the creation of a global culture Brian McLaren calls the suicide machine.

Crises -- those moments of danger and decision, the turning points of the whole story, when everything matters intensely – crises strip us of the inconsequential and the extraneous. Like the crisis we call conversion. A late fourth-century church order directs

that the bishop enter the vestibule of the baptistery and say to the catechumens without explanation or apology four words, “Take off your clothes.” The early liturgy knew that baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ meant leaving behind all that had been in order to enter the new life of grace like newborns. And for Christians, such crises and the stripping down to essentials they provoke are not to be feared or avoided; they are occasions for prayer and deepening trust and even thanksgiving. It is amazing how fearless and generous the patristic church was with its thanksgiving. There is a remarkable phrase in one ancient version of the Exultet that gives thanks to God even for the sin of Adam – *O felix culpa*, O happy fault of Adam, for without such a sin, sings the deacon, there would have been no need for such a savior.

The ultimate challenge for those of us who follow Christ might be just this willingness to open our arms to the mystery of the cross, to make it our way of living. To praise God for everything, everything ... even the mystery of our freedom to sin, and the far greater mystery of God’s refusal to let that stop him.

Let me tell you a little story I heard from a rabbi that tells this truth about the kind of people we’re called to be.

It seems a coastal city in the Holy Land received an ominous prophetic warning that it was about to be engulfed by divine retribution in the form of a giant tidal wave. The various faith communities gathered to figure out what to do in the face of this impending doom. The Muslims went to the highest mosque in the city and began to pray unceasingly for a speedy deliverance to the realms of paradise. The Christians repaired to their basilica to light candles and pray for the intercession of the saints to be spared this catastrophe. The Jews got together in their local synagogue where their rabbi began the prayers like this: “Blessed are you O God, King of the Universe ... you know, it’s going to be difficult living under thirty feet of water.”

We are people who know something about living under water. We are a people formed by crisis, by the tension of cross and resurrection, that tidal wave reshaping reality. We should not be surprised to find ourselves stripped naked by it. I believe it is what Jesus meant in those beatitudes of his. He provoked a crisis for those who assumed God’s approval of the status quo. Blessings are not what you think, he said. It’s not, “Blessed are they who are stuffed full and satisfied;” No, it’s “Blessed are they who know they are not.” In a remarkable new book, a young theologian named Peter Rollins, coming out of the emergent church movement, writes this: “For too long the Church has been seen as an oasis in the desert – offering water to those who are thirsty. In contrast, the emerging community appears more as a desert in the oasis of life, offering silence, space and desolation amidst the sickly nourishment of western capitalism. It is in the desert, as we

wander together as nomads, that God is to be found. For it is here that we are nourished by our hunger.”* Blessed are they, blessed are we when we know our poverty, when we know our need for God, when we can feel our hunger, when we know that this is what it means to be human and the only sure ground of community and not give a damn about anything less.

This is one of the gifts Blessed Enmegahbowh has for us. At a time when assumptions about who was in and who was out of God’s favor were as carefully constructed and defended as anything the Pharisees could come up with, God called Enmegahgowh through crisis to stand before his people. And in that one man and among those same people God redefined the meaning of blessed again. Blessed are they who refuse to believe the world’s lies about what makes us of value, that accidents of birth or culture or accomplishment make us worthy. Blessed are they who know they are of infinite value for one reason and one reason alone: God loves them. Enough to die for them. How beautiful indeed are the feet of those who bring news like that.

Friends, I want to be bold with you tonight. I want to ask you to open your arms, to stand nakedly before God, to risk giving thanks to God for everything that leaves us aware of our poverty, our hunger, our need for the only One who can ever satisfy us. I want to ask you to give thanks to God even for the crisis that stands before this blessed institution. I want to challenge you to dare to bless God for it all. In this moment, God is offering us the chance to live, to live even under water. God invites us to leave behind what has been in order to enter new life, new possibilities, a new season of faithfulness. Thank God, thank God for the work and witness of 150 years of faith and trust, Western and Seabury, Seabury-Western. Thank God, bless God for what may yet be.

* *How (Not) to Speak of God*, Paraclete Press, 2006, p. 42-43.