

Lenten Sermon Series 4: The Book Thief and the Thief

All Souls Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan

March 21, 2010

The Reverend Doctor Brent A. Smith, copyright@2010

INVOCATION

We give thanks for this day, and its beauty and promise.

We give thanks for the light returning from darkness.

We give thanks for the blessings of family, friends, and the company of companions.

We give thanks for hands that hold ours when we are hurting, that hold up our bodies when we are weary, and soothe our spirits when we seek solace.

We give thanks for a day we did not create, and the hope that lies in every moment of trial and triumph.

We give thanks for having been given trust and love, to give trust and love back to the world, and from the gift of this day, build a greater life for all souls.

CHALICE LIGHTING

We light this Chalice to remember a truth,

Consecrated through the ages by the service and sacrifice

Of individuals and communities:

There abides a unity and freedom of the Spirit,

Expressed through a love for all souls.

Readings

Genesis 11: 1-9 The Tower of Babel Story

At this time the whole world spoke one language, and everyone used the same words. As people moved from the east, they found a plain in the land of Babylonia and settled there. They said to each other, "Let's make bricks and bake them to make them hard." So they used bricks instead of stones, and tar instead of mortar. Then they said to each other, "Let's build a city and a tower for ourselves, whose top will reach high into the sky. We will become famous. Then we will not be scattered over all the earth." The Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the people had built. The Lord said, "Now, these people are united, all speaking the same language. This is only the beginning of what they will do. They will be able to do anything they want. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not be able to understand each other." So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. The place is called Babel since that is where the Lord confused the language of the whole world. So the Lord caused them to spread out from there over the whole world.

The Book Thief, Markus Zusak

Here is a small fact: You are going to die.

I am in all truthfulness attempting to be cheerful about this whole topic, though most people find themselves hindered in believing me, no matter my protestations. Please, trust me. I most definitely can be cheerful. I can be amiable. Just don't ask me to be nice. Nice has nothing to do with me. I am nothing if not fair.

I could introduce myself properly, but it's not really necessary. You will know me well enough and soon enough, depending on a diverse range of variables. It suffices to say that at some point in time, I will be standing over you, as genially as possible. Your soul will be in my arms. I will carry you gently away.

Yes, I have seen a great many things in this world. I attend the greatest disasters and work for the greatest villains.

But then there are other moments.

There's a multitude of stories that I allow to distract me as I work. I pick them up in the unluckiest, unlikeliest places and I make sure to remember them as I go about my work. The Book Thief is one such story. I saw the book thief three times.

I should tell you that the book thief died only yesterday.

I wanted to tell the book thief many things, about beauty and brutality. But what could I tell her about those things that she didn't already know? I wanted to explain that I am constantly overestimating and underestimating the human race – that rarely do I ever simply estimate it. I wanted to ask her how the same thing could be so ugly and so glorious, and its word and stories so damning and brilliant.

None of those things, however, came out of my mouth.

All I was able to do was to turn to the book thief and tell her the only truth I truly know. I said it to the book thief and I say it now to you.

I am haunted by humans.

Sermon

Liesel Meminger is the book thief in the fictional work by Markus Zusak, an early adolescent, not-yet young woman in 1939 Germany, who “*by her [little] brother's graveside picks up a book dropped in the snow by one of the young grave diggers, The Grave Digger's Handbook, and in her first act of book thievery, begins a love affair with books and words and, with the help of her foster father, learns to read. She steals books from Nazi book-burnings and the mayor's library, in dangerous times. Her foster family hides a Jewish man in their basement, opening up one world to her and closing down another.*” She continues her book thievery, enlisted by the townsfolk to read underground during Allied air raid bombings their city, until finally the teen puts her own

pen to the paper and writes a book. She befriends the man they are hiding and later, after their neighborhood is bombed and destroyed, and her foster family and best friends are killed, after the war and the immediate horror have drifted off into dreams and she is older, she meets up with her basement dwelling friend who has escaped the Nazi murder of the Jews and is living free.

Words are as the key character in this book for it is through words that the destruction and creation of Liesel's world come about. Death comes to life through the narrator's words and we see human frailty and friendship and folly and ferocity in a new way through "Death's eyes" and whom Death visits. Has Death ever visited someone next to you or, like many, did you come in immediately after the visit? The wordsmith tells of the genesis of this literary idea, as if he himself had authored the Tower of Babel story: *"I thought of Hitler destroying people with words, and now I had a [character] who was stealing them back, as she read books with the young Jewish man in her basement and with words calmed people down in the bomb shelters."* *"The pen is mightier than the sword"* is more true than *"sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me."* They can and do launch world wars. And one language with everyone using the same words is a signal that there is a void where freedom once thrived, even though there may be power enough to build a tower into the heavens!

Governments don't like words they cannot regulate, cannot give "spin" to, and religions like to think they can control their use and meaning. People fling them about as if their value is as cheap as their number. I've have been to my share of churches, ours and others, where I have been told I could not use the word "God" or had to, was told by individuals that because I use it too much or not enough they would boycott services when I spoke. It is so obvious what idols are being worshipped, the gods venerated so as not to offend. I speak those words when cautioned not to, and refrain when insisted I must, and am invited to leave at the worst of those churches and am never invited back at the best of them. Words are power, and who controls the vocabulary shapes thought and act, make no mistake about that. What control do you have over your own words at your work, at your children's schools, at a luncheon with your friends, what words can you not speak or must say? It is why our forbears used a spiritual clasp to attach literacy to freedom through teaching individuals to read the Bible and interpret it for themselves.

Shells destroy momentarily, take life indiscriminately, but words banned or flung like missiles can demolish for generations and be honed in on whom they will annihilate with smart-bomb precision.

Passover begins March 30 and words play a prominent role in the story of the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt, as Moses' demand is remembered, *"Let my people go!"* And on Easter the proclamation will be recalled again, *"He is risen!"* And the Gospel John links Judaism with Christianity from its start, *"In the beginning was the Word."* And one may remark sarcastically that, of course, words are notable because no story is without them, and yet that is ignorance when considering other great religions. Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, hold silence as critical to the practice of the faith.

It's why scholars refer to Judaism and Christianity as "People of the Book," so critical are words to the Westerner's perspective on meaning.

But why thievery, why *stealing* words? In the version of Easter from the Christian Gospel of Luke Jesus is crucified alongside of two others, one who mocks him and the other admitting that while he is being justly punished for his criminality, Jesus is innocent, no criminal. The tragedy of an innocent being put to death by both government and religion is proclaimed by a thief. Certain kinds of thievery reveal the inevitable location of tragedy inside human existence. The poor and hungry Jean Valjean from Hugo's *Les Misérables*, steals a single loaf of bread so his family will not starve, and is branded a criminal for life. He is pursued by the premier personification of law and order, Inspector Javert. Humanity's measurement of what is just is flawed, though necessary. If everyone stole then confusion and chaos would reign, and yet not all thievery is equal. Equality and freedom, then, are related but separate virtues. Thievery reveals this. What else can it reveal?

Though misery abides in Nazi Germany, many are not the innocent Valjean or Jesus. There are innocents like Liesel's playmate Rudy, and victims of tragedy like the hidden Jew and her foster parents who hide him. And, ironically, even the Book Thief herself is innocent in a certain way. But, there is plenty of complicity to go around. Complicity is not equal but guilt, like the narrator Death, is an egalitarian and visits all. Words harbor power like a new car showroom, and people freely consent to give power to the individuals who drive them. Many a nation has bowed in homage to the one who wields the words as skillfully as a swordsman carves up his prey. Many a religious congregation has given over its welfare and individuals their faith, to silver-toned orators or well polished church doctrines and creeds and epistles. Human beings will trade the birthright of love for the pottage of the right words or emotionally moving phraseologies. It is not that words inherently carry the power as much as they convey the power the hearers freely consent to invest them with. One gossipy, malcontented, nay-saying complainer in a congregation can wreck all kinds of mischief and havoc under the rubric of "I'm just telling it like it is." Incredibly some flock to that.

It is not simply who controls the words controls the power because minds that interpret them are complicit in their effect for weal or woe. There is human responsibility for the quality of the world, especially in terms of words and freedom. The rebellious act of stealing words suggests that no one individual or group can control them or own them like property! The authority we freely attach to words gives them their power!

Those who say they love freedom, and especially those who say they love freedom as a holy thing, but do little to support and sustain it, betray the power of their words by the deficiency of their deeds.

Last week the Texas State Board of Education voted to rearrange the order and kind of words used in public school social studies, economics, and history textbooks the state will purchase. It is doubtful that the majority of people in the US will notice since the books themselves will still contain words and most all parents at minimum just want

their children to learn. But, because of its large population Texas - like California, New York state, and Florida - influences what public school children read in other states like ours. Among the changes, Thomas Jefferson will no longer be regarded as a model founder of American democracy and the ideas he proffered will give way to the ideas of Aquinas and Calvin, and, as one news service reported, *“heavy emphasis will be placed on the founding fathers having been guided by strict Christian beliefs.”* I know what those words mean: Heavy emphasis will link political liberty and individual freedom to the “right beliefs” of Christian orthodoxy and the theological doctrines derived from the Christian creeds, regardless of what the words of history denote.

People of the Book who read the book in that way were part of the founding of this country, but also People of the Book who read the book as Unitarian Thomas Jefferson did, and find it best to keep separate from one another the domains of power concentrated in church and state. Part of the founding of this country and crucial to the order of political liberty is the concept of inherent human rights granted *not by governments or religion*, but by birth, the birthright of Thomas Jefferson’s idea. When you read the Bible as a book favoring freedom and advocating the liberty of soul and conscience from the control of government or even the necessary influence of religion, you are reading existence in its ultimate dimension, as friendly to freedom. And when words are used to promulgate narrowness, hatred, or propaganda, then to read something more than the same words everybody uses, becomes an act of freedom. You become like a book thief who absconds with words to take back their power from those who would build Babel Towers with the power of one language and everybody using the same words. You step into the tradition that sees freedom as a spiritual thing, a gift made not by human hands but shaped by what we do and leave undone.

Since serving our churches in 1983 I have heard it told how our people used to be on area and state school boards influencing directly the shape of public education, and teachers in public schools and universities filled our pews. By saying, that I do not know if I am speaking in the tongues of nostalgia or prophetic demand. I do know too many in our churches now focus on whether the preacher uses the word “God” too much or not enough! And I do know that while every human being is born into freedom, it thrives and is sustained by education.

Your Adult Education Board has given you a great gift. By invitation of the minister they deliberated, counseled amongst themselves, and discerned what books they would invite the minister to preach on. It was an invitation with forethought. I was hoping the congregation would create another expression of its spiritual character to put alongside of the BRANCHES readings, the Mid-Winter Lectures, the Adult Forums, the Thanksgiving Seder and Thanksgiving Sunday worship, the Hallelujah Chorus sung at Easter, the Auction with the Institute for the Healing of Racism, and the Freedom to Read Bonfire picnic in the autumn of the year, to name a few.

When you engage your new minister this next fall you can counsel that the words in these books reveal what this congregation is charged to become, in the same way you can counsel members of your congregation who haven’t heard this series. The book, *Life*

of Pi, tells of the spiritual attitude it is necessary to cultivate in the 21st century for freedom to thrive. The book, *Two Old Women*, tells of the issues confronting the relationship, the covenant between an individual and The People that the Divine image in which human being is created might thrive. *The Jefferson Bible* sets the foundation of spiritual freedom in bringing reason to matters of political and spiritual concern so that the rights of all can and will be defended as having a divine origin beyond both church and state.

And *The Book Thief* offers recognition that spiritual freedom is involved in the freedom of words given and the freedom of their interpretation; the Free Pulpit you lend to your minister to declare what his or her faith is so that you might walk alongside of them in a meaningful way; and the Free Pew, which you guard by your devotion to the wide accessibility of it in terms of diverse theological views. You guard these as holy things, a charge different from all other faiths and congregations in this culture. It prospers as you thrive and flourishes as your flourish, and surely as it will, and in the history of Grand Rapids has, diminishes as you will it.

Sometimes, wrote philosopher William James, life feels like a fight, for freedom is a struggle not a vacation, and words are the vehicles of that struggle and the terrain traversed and at stake, is individual consent, human rights, and liberty and justice for all. You are called individually and this congregation collectively through the words of this congregation and ideas of this faith tradition: *There is a unity and freedom of the Spirit expressed through a love for all souls*. Live those words into the reality they symbolize through your work in the world.

AMEN.