

2006 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

by
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Ordinary Time: A Tribute to Rowan Williams

Psalm 74
Revelation 5: 7-10
Matthew 6: 25-34

"The hardest thing in the world is to be where we are" observes Rowan Williams in his Lent book, Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgment. Enigmatic though it may be I think the Archbishop's remark, "The hardest thing in the world is to be where we are," is one worth pondering if we are to negotiate faithfully the current challenges before church and world. By asking you to reflect with me on this remark I hope to show why we are fortunate at this time to have Rowan Williams as our Archbishop of Canterbury. He is an extraordinary theologian whose work is an invaluable resource for helping the church "to be where we are." Accordingly I want to use this occasion to honor Rowan by suggesting how his understanding of time can help us be the church God has called us to be.

The anthropologist David Scott has described our time as damaged. By damaged he means we live in a time in which the once familiar characterizations of time no longer seem compelling. According to Scott, "inerasable residues from the past stick to the hinges of the temporality we have come to rely on to secure our way, and consequently time is not quite as yielding as we have grown to expect it to be." The persistence of racism and war name the "inerasable residues from the past" that make the time in which we live seem damaged. We live after civil rights and after the cold war but nothing it seems has fundamentally changed. In fact the problems of race and war seem even more intractable because the past now seems useless for helping us discern any hope for the future.

In a damaged time we might expect—or at least hope— the church would be a beacon of hope, but instead we find ourselves consumed by debates about sexual conduct. That we are captivated by issues surrounding something called "sexuality" is an indication of the captivity of the church to money, class, and liberal political arrangements. Nothing makes such a captivity more apparent than the relegation of the church to the "private." Sex becomes the issue before the church because sex constitutes the realm of the "private." Watching Christians tear themselves apart over sexual conduct not only must entertain the secular powers, but also assure them that they will face no challenge from Christians. If we live in a damaged time we fear the church is part of the wreckage.

Yet I believe that living in damaged times and in a damaged church is where God would have us be. "The hardest thing in the world is to be where we are" is Rowan Williams' way to remind us that the time we have been given, our confusing and damaged time, is all the time we need to attend patiently to what seems to be the intractable and contingent problems that beset us. The name for that time, a name that has always been at the heart of Williams' work, is ordinary time. Animating Williams' work and ministry has been the conviction that through cross and resurrection we have been given the time, in a world that believes it has no time, to participate patiently in the conversation necessary for the discovery that we swim in the sea of God's love. To learn to live well in ordinary time requires the recognition that time, and the speech that constitutes time, is gift. In Lost Icons Williams observes that we have been given speech so that we might learn to honor God through the recognition of our dependency on the "unchosen truths about the universe, and ultimately with the most comprehensive 'fact' of all, the dependent condition of the universe and everything in it." Look at the birds of the air and consider the lilies of the field and see the love that moves the sun and the stars. Only such a love makes it possible to live where we are recognizing that today's trouble is enough for today.

By calling attention to sheer gratuity of speech Williams is trying to help us recognize the miraculous character of ordinary time. For to live well in ordinary time is no easy achievement because we are tempted to the dramatic in the desperate attempt to make our lives significant if not heroic. We are the church of the martyrs, who Williams observes in Christ on Trial, overcame the imperatives of violence by paying the most dramatic cost imaginable. Compared to the martyrs Williams asks how can our lives, our ordinary lives, lives that will never have to face the violence the martyrs faced, express the truth that violence has been overwhelmed and silenced by Christ?

Williams argues that we cannot and should not try to make our lives more authentic by dramatic gestures. Rather we must learn to engage in everyday tasks as common as learning to speak the truth and, perhaps even more demanding, to hear the truth through the time consuming work of conversation. For when we are no longer able to speak and hear the truth, language decays making it impossible to trust ourselves or our neighbor. We lose the ability, as Wendell Berry puts it, to "stand by our words." But "if there is no presence in words," Williams reminds us in Lost Icons, then there will be "no presence in speakers. If you can't trust the contract between word and world, speech and what it's trying to respond to, you can't trust what you may think you perceive 'within' either."

That we no longer trust ourselves or our language is the breeding ground of violence. Which means to learn to speak the truth, to learn to hear the truth, is the work of peace. It is hard and slow work requiring the overwhelming of the distrust of ourselves and one another. To be in conversation requires that we see ourselves with the eyes of others in a manner that our stance toward the world is put into question. It requires that "I have to face, and face down, my boredom, my expectation that the world will always give me satisfying roles to play. To put it more positively. I have to make an art of ordinary living."

The art of ordinary living, according to Williams, requires that we learn to live without fear of the complexity of everyday life. To learn to live with the complexity of everyday life means the church cannot fear having the conflicts necessary for peace. Moreover if the church is capable of such conflict the church cannot help but be deeply threatening to the world's systems of power based as they are on the fear of the other. A church constituted by peace, moreover, far from withdrawing from the world rather reveals that the world is the realm of the private. Therefore in contrast to the oft made suggestion that a commitment to nonviolence means the church must be apolitical, Williams argues in The Truce of God, it is the cloister which abandons the privacy of the world for "a solitude which forces people to confront their fear and evasiveness and so equips them for involvement by a stripping-down of the will."

The art of ordinary living as the art of learning to live with complexity obviously has implications for learning to live with the complexity of a confused and confusing church. In Christ on Trial Williams reports, having returned to England after some months working in the Anglican Church in South Africa, he found he was overwhelmed by a nostalgia for the church he had left. In South Africa the central questions seemed clear. In South Africa you knew where you should stand because the choices seemed dramatically clear. Returning to Britain meant facing a context in which the central questions were not clear nor did one know what kind of "resistance" was possible or constructive. He was painfully aware that it was no easy task to translate what he had learned in South Africa into the "more confused and weary environment" of England.

Williams confesses that he longs for a Church more true to itself. Such a church would be one more determined to oppose war, a church capable of offering hospitality to resident aliens who may be gay, a church that can challenge the economic practices that perpetuate poverty. Williams believes his desire for such a church is Godly yet he believes he

must also learn to live in and attend to the reality of the Church as it is, to do the prosaic things that can be and must be done now and to work at my relations now with the people who will not listen to me or those like me--because what God asks of me is not to live in the future but to live with honesty and attentiveness in the present, i.e., to be at home. We constantly try to start from somewhere other than where we are. Truthful living involves being at home with ourselves, not complacently but patiently, recognizing that what we are today, at this moment, is sufficiently loved and valued by God to be the material with which he will work, and that the longed-for transformation will not come by refusing the love and the value that is simply there in the present moment. Living in the truth involves the same sober attention to what is there--to the body, the chair, the floor, the voice we hear, the face we see--with all the unsatisfactoriness that this brings. Yet this is what it means to live in the kingdom where Jesus rules, the kingdom that has no frontiers to be defended. (Christ on Trial, pp. 85-86.)

I suspect that some of you are beginning to think--this cannot be Stanley Hauerwas saying this. Is Hauerwas, who spent a life criticizing the complacent church, becoming mellow in his old age? Has becoming an Anglican given him the delusion that he is now part of the establishment? Is he going to do the unimaginable, that is, say something nice about liberals? Let me assure you I do not think I am becoming mellow, I have always been part of the establishment but I have tried not to justify that placement, and I am certainly not going to say anything nice about liberals. Yet it is my conviction that Archbishop Williams' understanding of the time in which we must live as Christians, of how we must live in the world as we find it, shares much with what I learned first from John Howard Yoder.

An Anabaptist and the Archbishop of Canterbury are to be sure an odd couple, but confusing times can help us discover friends we did not know we had. At the heart of Yoder's work has been the attempt to teach us the difficult task of living where we are. Yoder's defense of Christian non-violence depends on an account of time very similar to that of Rowan Williams. For Christian pacifism does not promise to give us a warless world, but rather Christian pacifism depends on the presumption that in a world of war a people exist who have the time to engage in the slow and painful work of living in peace with one another.

They have the time to do such work because they have learned to sing:

"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,
 for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed
 for God
 saints from every tribe and language and people and nation,
 you have made them to be a
 kingdom and priests
 serving our God,
 and they will reign on earth."

Revelation 5: 9-10 (NRSV)

Yoder observes to "rule the world" in fellowship with the Lamb "will sometimes mean humbly building a grassroots culture, with Jeremiah. Sometimes (as with Joseph and Daniel) it will mean helping the pagan king solve one problem at a time. Sometimes (again with Daniel and his friends) it will mean disobeying the King's imperative of idolatry, refusing to be bamboozled by the claims made for the Emperor's new robe or his fiery furnace." We are able so

to live in the time "where we are" because we believe to so live is the shape of the work of Christ.

Yoder points out that when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples he did not make a lasting contribution to the hygiene of Palestine. "Similarly, when Christians devote themselves to the care of the seriously ill, of the mentally retarded, of the unproductive aged, the fruitfulness of this service cannot be measured by any statistical index of economic efficacy." Rather the meaning of the deed is what it signifies, namely, in a damaged time and in a damaged church we have learned to live "where we are" because that is the way of peace. In short, we have been given all we need to endure.

Recently two of my friends were discussing the decision of one of them to make an "ecclesial transition" to another church. The friend who was arguing against making such a move pointed out that there are many rooms in God's kingdom. Which elicited the response that while that is certainly true some of the rooms are better furnished than others. I think we are extremely fortunate to live in a church that is well furnished. We have all we need to live where we are. At the very least we have an Archbishop who exemplifies what it means to live patiently in time by refusing to let us isolate ourselves from one another. The name we give to that refusal is "communion."

The patience exemplified in the work and ministry of our Archbishop will also be required of you. You are going to spend most of your life dealing with the ordinary work of caring for the sick and dying, disputes between people who should know better, the failure of marriages, the child or youth who has done something really stupid, the celebration of a life of someone you do not like, questions of whether you still need an eight o'clock service for those who will not let go of Rite One. In short, you are going to live in ordinary time, undramatic time, in which your life will seem to dribble out one grain of sand at a time. But you will know where you are. You are in the time God has made possible, kingdom time, and the work you do is the

peace of God. Be patient, practice word care, keep the conversation going, and may God help you even learn to love our damaged church which is the only hope we have if we are to endure this damaged time.