

The Use of Profanity

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

 *John 2:13-25*

Annie Dillard, in her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, -- a book from which you've heard me quote before, a book that remains near the top of my list of all-time favorite books -- Annie Dillard shares her experiences and observations and meditations from the months she intentionally spent alongside a creek near her home in Southwestern Virginia -- Tinker Creek. As far as I know Tinker Creek is not unlike most other creeks -- water, rocks, bends and dips -- but when reading this book you sense from Ms. Dillard that her long pause before the creek allows it to take on for her a holy significance. It's not that the creek wasn't holy before she sat beside it -- it's that her pause allowed her to see the holiness, the beauty, the wonder of this little spot in God's creation. A little spot in what she calls the "extravagant gesture" of creation. She continues, "If the landscape reveals one certainty, it is that the extravagant gesture is the very stuff of creation. After the one extravagant gesture of creation in the first place, the universe has continued to deal exclusively in extravagances, flinging intricacies and colossi down aeons of emptiness, heaping profusions on profligacies with ever fresh vigor. The whole show has been on fire from the word go. I come down to the water to cool my eyes. But everywhere I look I see fire; that which isn't flint is tinder, and the whole world sparks and flames."

I don't know about you, but there are places in the world which I have visited and to which I have returned that seem to hold for me a holy significance. When I walk the battlefield at Gettysburg, which I've done more times than I can count, I get overwhelmed by a holy significance -- especially in the morning when the sun is rising over the Peach Orchard and Cemetery Ridge. God feels very near to me.

When I've paused long enough amidst the markers

in the American Cemetery in Normandy and take in the nearly ten thousand crosses and stars of David -- men who lost their lives in the first waves of the Normandy invasion -- I am overwhelmed by a holy significance. A certain gravity presses upon me and I sense the nearness of God.

When I weave myself down into the valley of Glendalough amidst the Wicklow mountains south of Dublin -- and pause enough days -- not hours -- but days, I feel the extravagant gesture. The glacial lake, the falling stream, the woods, the trails, the mountains -- I sense something there. God encroaches.

When I take a plane, a train, a bus and two ferries to what feels the outer edge of the world -- a little dot of an island off the west coast of Scotland -- the Isle of Iona -- and pause there for days -- again, not hours, but days -- I experience what the Celts call the "thin place" -- the place where the membrane between heaven and earth feels thin. And the words of the psalmist echo in my ear, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof -- the world and they that dwell therein." God is very near.

Now when visiting these thin places, these holy dwellings, I realize that the commonality among them -- has not as much to do with them as it does with me. These are places to which I have taken myself. They did not come to me, I went to them. In my mind I set out a plan and a path to get myself to those places in order to be reminded again of what is sacred, what is holy, what is extravagant in God's design. And I have taken myself to these places as a way to remove myself from other places. Namely -- the routine and rituals of my own life. The day in and day out of life, work and home. The emails, the texts, the Facebook, the Twitter, the newspaper. The Bee Ridge Rd. and the traffic lights and the honking horns and the radio and the TV and the latest sale at Walmart. And it's when I get myself to these holy places -- that I realize how thirsty I have been for the sacred. How parched my soul has become with the dryness of the profane.

And so it makes all the sense in the world the rage that Jesus feels when he makes an early visit to

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the temple in Jerusalem -- this sacred, holy place -- this house of prayer for God's people -- and what he finds inside is a 7-11 and a Dunkin Donuts and a lotto machine and a gift shop. Well, it wasn't quite like that -- but what has happened is that the sacred has been turned into a marketplace. A place to buy things that supposedly were supposed to help you worship and sacrifice to God. Temple tax payments, dove offerings, sheep and cattle sacrifices, you name it -- it was for sale and trade. And the temple had turned into the trading floor at the stock exchange -- a place to make a quick buck. The profane had made its way into the sacred. In fact that's what the word profane means -- it comes from the Latin profanus -- which means outside the temple. The outside the temple had come inside the temple. And the nearness of God had flown away. And Jesus gets ticked! Flipping tables, pushing over cash registers, chasing away animals. It was not pretty. But if you want to get Jesus mad -- start messing with the sacred. Start messing with the holy. Start messing with the extravagant gestures of God. Start inserting the profane into the sacred.

Because you see if there was anything Jesus was aware of -- it was this line between the sacred and the profane. The temple and what's outside the temple. And how easy it is for us to dwell in the

profane -- and take the profane into the sacred. But the sacred is where we find the intimate connection with God. And if there was anything Jesus was protective over -- it was the intimate, sacred connection between God and the people of God.

Now as it turns out Jesus found the sacred not just inside the temple -- but also outside the temple. In fact Jesus found the sacred permeating the universe. The sacred was all around. In the lilies of the field. In the seed and the soil. In the stars of heaven. In the wine and bread. In the waters of the Jordan River. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof -- the world and they that dwell therein. The good God had made a good world. Everywhere we look we see the extravagant gestures of God. And most of all Jesus saw the sacred, the holy, the extravagance in the image of God imprinted in every single human being. Every single soul is a sacred creation. When I dwell in the presence of a person I dwell in the presence of God. "To love another person," Victor Hugo wrote, "is to see the face of God."

But there is the challenge -- because is the same true for you as it is for me -- that my experience of the holy has more to do with what I do to take myself there? And by there -- I mean not only Gettysburg, Normandy and the Scottish Isles -- but

there in the sacred that surrounds me every day? Because you know one of the things about starting over is understanding where you are. In this effort to follow Jesus – new purpose behind a new person – and to see our lives as a fine vintage – the compendium of our lives blended to make a rich offering to the world – but then to see the world differently – and to see people differently – and to realize that the sacred surrounds us – and the intimate nearness of God surrounds us – and the holy dwells inside every single person we meet – and what we do either blesses it or profanes it.

Wendell Berry said it this way: “There are no unsacred places. There are only sacred places and desecrated places.” Always there exists this choice we have to receive what is before us as holy – or to treat what is before us with profanity.

Profanity. That which I use to profane the holy presence of God before me. To take what is outside the temple inside the temple.

Don't you wonder why it is that Jesus and the disciples and the religious leaders spent so much time talking about the Sabbath – about how best to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy? Well it came from this deep understanding that time was holy. Time was sacred. Time was as precious as a diamond. And so when God says Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy – it's God's way of saying – you are surrounded by the sacredness of time – now don't profane it. Don't throw all seven days of the week away to earning a buck and doing the chores. Stop and rest and receive the holiness of time.

Don't you wonder when Jesus sits down with any number of people – the sick, the lepers, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the Samaritans, the Gentiles – if he isn't trying to point out the sacredness of every living person? And while it seemed pretty easy for lot of folks to dismiss lots of folks because of who they were or what they had done – Jesus was intimately aware of the holiness inside.

Don't you wonder that when Jesus says, “If you call someone a fool,– you will be liable to the hell of

fire.” That maybe he's just as mad at any names we might think to call someone or any profanity we might think to use as he is with a Dunkin Donuts in the temple? That to somehow desecrate another human being with a label or an insult is to lose sight of the nearness of God? Or maybe to lose sight of yourself?

When the profane becomes our way of life ... or our way of talk ... or our way of engagement – I think Jesus thinks we are giving up on ourselves. We're losing sight not only of what is in front of us – but what is inside of us. The profanity we intend to use to desecrate what is before us – finds its way back to us. And we lose sight of ourselves.

I remember when I was a boy and hanging around a bunch of other boys who were pretty loose with their language – including every imaginable four-letter word and all sorts epithets for just about every race known to man. And after hearing my older brothers experiment with their own language I went to my mother and naively asked her what swear words I was allowed to use, what names I was allowed to call other people. And she asked me, “Why do you want to swear? Why do you want to call someone a name?” “Well,” I said, “all my friends are doing it.” And after she gave me that “would you jump off a bridge if your friends jumped off a bridge” line, she said something I'll never forget. She said, “You know when you swear it usually means your angry or that your feeling maybe some hate. And swearing and calling someone a name says that you think that's OK. That it's OK to hate someone. To be angry and lash out. It's OK to make fun of someone. And whenever someone does that – it always makes them look ugly. It just does. And why would you want someone to think you're ugly?”

When the profane becomes our way of life or our way of talk – when we look at the creation or the person before us or the person across the globe with any measure of disdain – Jesus says, “You're giving up on yourself. Because you can't take the beauty away from someone else without taking the beauty away from yourself.” When we participate

in the extravagant gesture around us – we become extravagant gestures ourselves.

There's a story about a Chasidic rabbi who noticed that his son would often make his way into the backyard of their house and then from there walk into the woods behind their property for long periods of time. At first this didn't concern the rabbi. But after a while he grew worried about this practice – the boy would be gone for longer and longer and Lord knows what one might find in the woods. Finally, the rabbi father asked the son, “Why do you always make your way into the woods?” The boy said, “I go there to find God.” “Well, that's very good,” said the father. “But you know, God is the same everywhere.” “Yes,” said the boy, “but I'm not.”

I worry sometimes about our weary old world. I worry that the labels we sometimes use and the disregard we might have for some people or the swear words that slip too easily from our lips or the assault that takes place against women or people different than us, the ways we sometimes work ourselves to the bone – means that maybe we've lost sight of the nearness of God. Not God the policeman who's waiting to arrest us for doing bad. But God the beautiful one. Who made everything and everyone beautiful. Who wants more than anything else for us to see around us and within us his extravagant gesture. And to in turn become extravagant gestures ourselves.

What a way to start over.



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