



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

By Another Road

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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 2:1-12

SERMON: “By Another Road”

King Herod imagined himself powerful. And to a certain extent, he was. Herod fancied himself a tough guy. Well, he did rule with an iron fist. He eliminated any and all who would stand in his way, whether Baptizer or Baby, whether Magi or Messiah. But the Bible here in this passage, and in subsequent passages from Matthew, reminds us of a truth about Herod, and about so many other tough guys just like him, that it was not actually power or strength that drove Herod. Instead, it was fear. In verse 3 of this reading, Herod was frightened, Matthew tells us.

John Steinbeck observed a truth about fear and power that we need to remember, not just for this story and for this king, but for our times and for all who would claim similar power. Steinbeck writes that power does not corrupt, but rather fear does. And perhaps most of all, Steinbeck goes on to say, the fear of losing power. It is that fear that leads to judgment, fear of there not being enough – not enough power. Maybe for us, not enough forgiveness, not enough love. Fear, you see, results in competition, it results in blaming, it results in recrimination. Power lashing out in violence to mask and hide the fear that runs below it all. Power that both corrupts the one wielding it out of fear, but also and absolutely the ones who bear the brunt of it. Like the power we see on display in the passage just after this week’s reading, a fear that there might be some child out there who is going to rise up and take his place, Herod sought out to destroy them all out of his fear and his insecurity. By the way, that fear would come to consume Herod. Matthew talks about his fear numerous times later in his gospel. The result of his fear and the power that he wielded didn’t just affect him, it left a whole nation of parents weeping inconsolably, both changed and none for the better.

No wonder why those magi returned by a different road, with Herod and his threats of power running loose. But then again, I think there was another greater power on the loose, a power that changed their path. For the Bible says that those magi were overwhelmed, but not and never by fear. Gandhi proclaims this truth, that power

exists in two kinds. One is obtained through fear and the threat of punishment. But the other, more powerful, is obtained by acts of love. I think the change in course of the magi was due far less to Herod's blustering threats and far more by the overwhelming goodness of the power of God's love poured out to freely.

Can you remember the last time you overwhelmed with joy? Not just happy, not just glad, not even just tearful. But when was the last time you were fully overwhelmed? For when you are overwhelmed, your body opens to all sorts of new things. Barriers fall because they too have been overwhelmed. And the magi, Matthew tells us, they were overwhelmed with joy. They were filled with awe, is another way of putting it. And there is no surprise, I think, that those magi by definition would leave on a different road, because once overwhelmed, once filled with awe, everything changes. Awe is expansive, revealing more than what was holding us captive. Awe is powerful, breaking into self-perpetuating cycles of fear and violence that often entrap us.

I wish I could claim those last two ideas. They were written by Father Greg Boyle, a person who believes that awe changes everything. He writes this stunning truth. "Awe softens us for the tender glance of God that gives us power to glance in the same way." Let me repeat that for you. "Awe softens us for the tender glance of God that gives us power to glance in the same way." You need to know this about Father Greg Boyle. He's a devout Jesuit. He takes his faith very seriously as a blueprint for life. His training would have you consider the wisdom of someone like Julian of Norwich, who remarked that the truest and most authentic spiritual life is one that abides in awe, humility and love.

But it's actually through his ministry that he has seen just how powerful humility and love can be in helping all get to that powerful posture of awe. In his great book, "Barking to the Choir," he tells story after story after story about how he came to know that truth, working with more tough guys than you can possibly imagine. If his name sounds familiar, it's because he founded Homeboy Industries in central L.A. Los Angeles, by the way, is the place with more gang members than any other city on the planet. Those industries grew out of his desire, not to change those gang members, but instead to love them, to humbly serve them, and let awe come upon them.

What Father Boyle, or "G." as he is known in L.A., has learned is that to open people up to the sense of awe first requires that humility that Julian talked about, not just on the gang members' part, not just on their part that they need a different road, because they know that. But equally and more upon all of us who would seek to be in relationship with them, the humility to enter with them into genuine kinship, for we know that we have as much or more to learn from them as they do from us. Second, that humility manifests in love. Love, rather than judgment. Oh, G. is criticized all the time by people who claim he should be harder on those gang members. But love, rather than judgment, G. believes, is the only kind of thing that not only saves but instead opens us up to awe.

To read his book is to encounter story after story after story about those now former gang members. And here's what he would tell you about them. Nearly all of them grew up in households ruled by King Herods, in households where fathers and mothers ruled with iron fists. Nearly all of these gang members are victims of violence as children, until they too became affected, corrupted by that violence, until they also followed that road inexorably where it leads. Growing up in fear that breaks down relationship, instills competition and breeds shame and hurt. Like the story of 23-year-old Jorge. Father Boyle will tell you he's the tough guy of tough guys, someone you would not want to mess with. But he recounts this encounter with Jorge where Jorge is sobbing, and he chokes out to Father Boyle memories of crying every single time his parents beat him, which was nearly every single day, crying and crying and crying until he became ashamed of those tears and vowed that he would never cry again.

The power not to cry – not so much a strength – but again, instead, coming out of that place of fear. And he didn't find a new beginning until that greater power of humility, love and awe found him in Homeboy. But here's what really caused him to see what path he was on. The reason he was sobbing, the reason he came to see Father Boyle, was that he was absolutely horrified to find himself holding his mother and his girlfriend at gunpoint. Horrified that the path that he was on, one judgment would say he chose, one love might say was chosen for him, put him in a place where he looked exactly like the ones he vowed never to be like. He bleated this out to Father Boyle: "I don't want to belong to my wounds."

And isn't that so true for all of us? Humble love, you see, when it's poured out allows all of us to see our wounds and to acknowledge them, not as final or determinant, but instead to embrace, that through that humble love, through that baby in the manger, through love poured out, a new road might be found. Awe softens us to the tender glance of God that we might see the whole world, and us too, in the same way God see us, and in doing so, new roads might open up before us.

And friends, that is what Epiphany – not just this day of magi, but the season – is all about, facing our wounds and our fears, and finding that new road opening before us in awe, releasing us from whatever fears corrupt and whatever power we feel exerted over us. I think one of the beauties of this text is that Matthew doesn't tell us what the magis' joy was in that tiny child, that new birth, that moment of awe. Instead, he just tells us that it freed them from the power even of a tough guy like Herod. I think it leaves it open so that we too can bring whatever wound, whatever fear, and whatever tough guy is looming over us, that we might see our path, and then find a new one.

I do think this, though, that what the Child reveals is that when it comes to love, when it comes to God's love, God's love is only and always for us. God's love is only and always for us. For God so loved the world that God sent Jesus, that we might not be condemned, but that we might be saved. God's love is for us, always a gift given, rather than anything earned from us. And when humble love is poured out, whether in

the form of that Child, or in the form of this Table, we are invited to experience that expansive power of awe, that overwhelming joy the magi found. Not just a smile, not even a choked back tear, but to be so overwhelmed by the love at this table that chills run up and down our spines. For new roads are always available to us if we just let go of our own power, or the fears that have driven us, and open ourselves to see that road has been there all along.

Of all the stories in Father Boyle’s book that conveyed awe to me, was the one about Rogellio and his 6-year-old son Arturo. I don’t know why this story of a father with a 6-year-old might bring meaning to me, but it did! You see, Rogellio had been in gangs for years, and now he was trying his unsteady hand at parenthood. They had gone to a pool together, the two of them, and Rogellio’s son kept begging him over and over again to do a cannonball – you know, where you jump in and hold your legs and make a big splash that splashes everybody. For some reason that brought Arturo great joy, and so Rogellio did it over and over again until he could do it no more. Here’s how Father Boyle tells the story: “Rogellio asks for a respite from the do-it-agains, and flops down on his towel at the edge of the pool. Little Arturo swims towards his father and folds his arms at the pool’s lip, facing him. They don’t speak. Rogellio is lying on his stomach and sees his kid’s face is but two feet away from his. Finally Arturo says, ‘Papa, when I have a son, I want to be a dad just like you.’ When Rogellio tells me the story over the phone, this last line silences him. I wait. ‘What are you feeling right now?’ I ask. Rogellio pauses. Then voice cracking, he says, ‘Chills. Awe. The very pulse of God.’”

Maybe that is the joy that overwhelmed the magi, that beautiful wisdom of God saving through extending humble love, offering it over and over again like those cannonballs, designed to bring us delight, that one day you and I might exhaustively swim to the side of the pool and are able to look God in the eye without needing to say a word, and commit to being a parent just like God is to us. Love poured out for us. Awe breaks out. And I promise you, new paths emerge.

Friends, I think that is the glory, the joy, the awe, and the possibility – not just of this day and this season – but the path that Jesus lays out before us if we just let go of everything else and follow.



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