

## Père Marquette Discovery Award Acceptance

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Thank you so very, very much for this great distinction bestowed on me; that I should be finding myself in such a galaxy of luminaries who have received this award before me. Thank you so very, very much, all of you and this great university. I have usually said of distinctions of this kind that I receive them in a representative capacity, that the real heroes and heroines are the millions back home who are the real stalwarts of our struggle. And I have frequently said when one is in a crowd and stands out, it is only because one is being carried on the shoulders of others. After all what is a leader without followers?

Now don't get the idea, 'Oh isn't he nice, he's so modest.' I'm not conventionally modest, I can assure you, and I have to tell a story that I've repeated many times. My wife and I were visiting West Point Military Academy, and at the end of the visit the cadets gave me a cap as a memento. It did not fit. And a nice wife would have said, 'Oh the cap is too small.' My wife, speaking from the knowledge of 48 years of marriage, said, "His head is too big."

Isn't it quite extraordinary how God chooses to operate in the world? This omnipotent, omniscient one who created us without our help. How it is that God has seemed to insist that with the advent of humans God would never again undertake any project on earth without enlisting the partnership, the collaboration of God's human creatures? And so God creates woman and man in God's image and they are from then expected to act as God's representatives, God's stand-ins, God's stewards operating on behalf of God with God in tandem as co-creators, as collaborators to have dominion over the rest of God's creation.

And then there is the call of Abraham, which is a prelude to the call of an entire people to be a light to the nations. To be collaborators with God in the God project, the divine enterprise of redeeming God's creation to bring all things to unity in Christ Jesus, all that had disintegrated because of the fissiparousness, the centrifugal power of sin. Just one example which could be a paradigm is how God sets out to redeem the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. No one doubts that God could, in a sense did, accomplish the exodus with no help from anyone. And yet look at the pains God took to persuade Moses to be God's partner, being willing to jeopardize the success of this enterprise by having a bungling fellow worker.

"Moses."

"Hi God."

"Will you please go down to Pharaoh?"

"What? God, you can't be serious. Do you know why I am here in Midian? It was to escape the wrath of Pharaoh and you want me to do what? To go back there? No, God. And in any case God..." And he's telling the omniscient one, "You know God, I... I... I... I...I stammer. Please send Aaron, he is eloquent."

Remarkable that God had to spend so much time when God could just have gone ahead with the business of the exodus. After all, it was God who'd visit the Egyptians with the plagues and it would be God's power that would let the waters of the Red Sea overwhelm the host of Egypt. It must be that God took very seriously the contribution, however miniscule, from God's human partner. It was for real that God wanted it always to be a theandric project. We see, too, in the way God had to convince a very reluctant Jeremiah to take on the onerous vocation, really a thankless task, of being Yahweh's prophet. To persuade this sensitive retiring soul, God makes a tremendous assertion. "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you." Translated to mean, "Hey, you are not an afterthought, Jeremiah. You have been part of my plans, my purpose for all eternity."

None of us is an afterthought. None of us is an accident. We might some of us *look* like accidents, but none, none is. Which is fantastic. All this just so that God would have a human collaborator in the divine enterprise. Or you might imagine something like:

"Knock, knock."

"Who's there?"

"Gabriel."

"Gabriel, who?"

"Gabriel, the archangel. Hello Mary."

"Hello."

"Mary, God would like you to be the mother of His Son."

"What? You really can't be serious. Do you know in this village you can't scratch yourself without everybody knowing about it? And you want me to be what? An unmarried mother! Sorry, I'm a decent girl. Try next door."

Had that been the final response, we would have been up a creek. Mercifully, she said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be done to me according to Thy word." And the whole universe breathed a cosmic sigh of relief and the Incarnation could happen and our salvation be on the way to being accomplished.

Those who would be so enlisted would be persons who might help to reflect the characteristics of their divine partner. The world we inhabit has always been the theatre of power play. Mostly the powerful would seem to exercise power that was coercive, that would be expressed through verbs in the imperative mood. God's power turned out to be different. God's power mostly was persuasive power that thought to woo the other, not to control, not to manipulate the other. It turned out to be kenotic power. Power demonstrated in being poured out, emptied on behalf of others. This seems to be the only way God could be God. Where from all eternity to all eternity,

the Father poured out all the Father's being into the Son who in return poured out His being in a mutual self-emptying and this dynamic way of being was Holy Spirit, binding the three with this eternal movement of self-emptying donation.

And so when God created us, then there was no way in which God could reject the gift of personhood, with its freedom to choose to love or to hate, to obey or to disobey, to accept or to reject the gift of divine love and life. God would show forth a profound reverence for our creaturely autonomy, our personal space. So that God would much rather we went freely to hell, than compel us to go to heaven. And whenever we made, or were about to make the wrong choice, God did not intervene except in a rejectable offer of grace to choose right. God could, only as it went, look on impotently and there was nothing that God could do to nullify our freedom. All God could do was to wait eagerly, expectantly, impotently, for the prodigal to return from the far country. And when God spied us way, way in the distance, God thrust aside, threw off all the divine right to heavenly dignity. And God lifted God's skirt to reveal His ankles brazenly and shamelessly; to rush undignifiedly down the main street of the village to the chagrin of the pompous ones to embrace the lost one who had been found, the dead one who had come to life again. To embrace this one covered in the crime of a pigsty, smelling to high heaven, to smother him with kisses, having the servants dress him in the best robe and to have the fatted calf killed causing so much consternation outraging the prim and proper ones.

Being a God of disgracefully loose standards who let there be greater joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 who needed no repentance. The divine power is shown more gloriously, most paradoxically, in witness in the one who emptied himself of all claims to divine dignity and authority and took on the form of a servant. Being born, not in a royal palace, but in a stable — of parents who did not even have the clout to get a room in the village inn.

You might have heard the story of the Nativity play, which went a little awry, and it says: Joseph rushes up to the innkeeper and says, "Please, please help. My wife is pregnant and she is about to give birth."

The innkeeper says, "It's not my fault."

And Joseph says, "It's not mine either!"

This one who became obedient even unto death, the supreme, the ultimate form of kenosis, of self-emptying, and not a particularly attractive form of death but excruciating even down to death of a notorious felon. St. John referred hardly ever to Jesus dying, but almost always to his glorification, his exaltation, his being lifted up, and always not for self-aggrandizement but for the sake of others. I, if I be lifted up, will draw all to me. This is my body, given up for you. My blood shed for you and my life given as a ransom for many. Therefore God has highly exalted him. And it turns out that there is no other way to true glory.

In the world we have seen so frequently people seeking power of all kinds. Especially coercive, controlling power, shunting others around. The power of money, political power, military power, prestige — power ultimately for self-glorification, for self-aggrandizement. And we have equally, frequently been attracted to such as moths to a light. It has hardly ever been that it was

life-enhancing for others. It has mesmerized and attracted hangers-on, frequently again kowtowing, sycophantic, obsequious...Telling the boss what they think the boss wants to know. Not often the uncomfortable awkward truths.

And yet a paradoxical feature of our success-oriented societies is that these hard-nosed, often cynical ones revere not the macho, the aggressive ones. No, it is such as a Mother Theresa, a Mahatma Ghandi, a Martin Luther King, Jr., a Dalai Lama, a Nelson Mandela. Now in different ways they have been our leaders who have reflected a divine pattern of power vulnerable, weak, persuasive, kenotic. If almost without exception suffered, which is a good sign of not being, of not doing, something for self-aggrandizement. They have possessed few, if any, of the conventional instruments of coercive power. Theirs has been a life poured out on behalf of others, and people have recognized something they seem to have known in their tribal past. They have recognized goodness. They have antennae, which hone in on goodness, on caring, on compassion, on gentleness, on wanting to coax the best out of others. God wants to enlist us, you and me, in the God project, in the God enterprise, as God's fellow workers.

Not paragons of perfection, anything but. For almost always, God's servants, partners, have been flawed. Abraham was ready to pass off his wife as his sister to save his skin. Moses was short-tempered, breaking the tablets of the Law written by God's hand. David was an adulterer. Peter denied his master not once, but three times. Saul was the persecutor of the infant Christian community. And even after his conversion had a very short fuse and was given to a great deal of self-justification and could wish that his circumcising opponents in Galatia would mutilate themselves. Yes, we have this treasure in earthenware vessels so that it can be clear the abundant glory belongs to God. God the dreamer, the utopian, who believes that we his human creatures are family; created for togetherness, to live in a delicate network of complementarity and interdependence. God enlists us in the God project of realizing this dream; the actualization of being the family of God; the rainbow people of God.

God asks us to be agents of transfiguration; the God who could transfigure an instrument of the most excruciatingly painful and shameful death so that it becomes the source of a tingling, effervescent, bubbling eternal life. To proclaim that nothing, no one, no situation could ever be untransfigurable. Nothing, no one, no situation is beyond redemption, is totally devoid of hope. This God who could snuff out all troublemakers, does not dispatch perpetrators of evil, those who rule unjustly and oppress others. No, God waits, waits on us as those who will provide the bread and the fish so that God can perform God's miracles to end injustice and oppression, to end war, disease and ignorance. This God who, apart from us, will not — ~~as~~ we, apart from God, cannot.

And your, and your, and your particular contribution, your part in this, is in fact indispensable. For you are unique. And I tell people that on one occasion, for one of our birthdays, my wife gave me a birthday card, which is the least you can expect from your spouse. It showed on the outside a dove and...a couple with a nice caption: "We have a beautiful and unique relationship."

That's lovely. And then when you turn on the inside and it says, "I am beautiful and you are certainly unique."

There is mercifully no one quite like me, not even my twin. You remember how in a symphony orchestra, they're all dolled out — the players in formalwear — and they play some of those spectacular instruments, the cellos, the violins, the oboes, the French horns, the harp. And often in the back of the orchestra is someone dressed equally formally with a triangle, and in an elaborate work, the conductor will conduct the orchestra going off and they go voom, voom, voom. And now and again he will point to that person in the back and quite seriously and so solemnly he will strike the triangle — ping.

Now that might seem insignificant, and yet in the conception of the composer something indispensable would be lost to the total beauty of the composition if that ping did not happen there. We may not all accomplish spectacular achievements but something will go missing that is irreplaceable if we, if our peculiar contribution were to go missing. God quite breathtakingly and believably needs us, needs you, needs me. We could never be presumptuous to think that we have been chosen because of our moral, intellectual or other excellence...

...God's standards are low; God's standards are very high too. We have been called to be like God. Perfect as God is perfect. Holy as God is holy. Compassionate as God is compassionate. And so in a way the world does not comprehend, but will almost always admire, we must let our sun shine on the good and the bad. Let our rain fall on the just and the unjust. We are to have the bias of God who has a soft spot for the weak, for the oppressed, for the marginalized, for sinners. God's favorites in the Scriptures are the widow, the orphan, and the alien, in most societies those with the least clout, the weakest of the weak. Thus God companioned not with us bishops and such like, but with prostitutes, with the despised, with sinners, the scum of society, the most marginalized. That is where we would be. To be there for them. To be kenotic. Those who's lives are poured out on behalf of others. Who must scandalize the world as we get to love not to hate our enemies. As we pray for those who abuse us. As we bless and not curse those who deal with us spitefully. It would all be foolishness to the world who says, "Give as good as you get. You must strike preemptively before they get you."

God is crazy. How can the omnipotent be so weak as to die so shamefully on the cross? How can the eternal die? The foolishness of God is wiser than men. The weakness of God is stronger than men. In a culture that makes an obsession, a fetish, of activity, busyness and achievement, perhaps nothing seems so foolish for being at odds with a prevalent culture than those who, who do nothing but seek to be quiet as they spend themselves in contemplation. "What are you doing to justify your existence?" the world asks. We try to be still and so to know God. We will discover perhaps, one day, how much we have owed for our continued existence to those who chose the better thing, to sit quietly at the master's feet. To be just there. To be.

Ultimately, it is the power of the cross that overcomes evil and death. It is the power of love that overcomes hate. Unless we take up our cross to follow our Master, we cannot be his disciples. A church that does not suffer cannot be the church of this Jesus Christ. And only through that cross can it be that I, if I be lifted up, will draw all to me. And we may suffer to witness that in this family, there are no outsiders. All belong as insiders. All belong in this family. All, not some. All. Black and white, rich and poor, learned and ignorant, gay and straight, women and men, young and old, Serbs and Albanians, Palestinians and Israelis. All. Sharon and Arafat, Roman Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. All. All belong. George Bush, Saddam Hussein.

All. Colin Powell, Bin Laden. All. All are members of one family. Sisters and brothers. One family, the human family, God's family, the rainbow people of God. And for Jesus, family is not just a nice, sentimental figure of speech. It is one of the most radical, literal truths Jesus uttered.

For he could say to a Mary Magdalene after his resurrection, speaking of those who had betrayed, who had denied, who had forsaken him, "Go and tell my brothers. Go and tell my brothers I ascend to my Father and their Father."

How could we contemplate so nonchalantly, as if we were ordering our breakfast, the prospect of visiting devastation and death on these others if we are family? How could we go on spending such obscene amounts on budgets of death and destruction, when we know that a small fraction of those budgets could ensure that those others had clean water, enough to eat, a good education, adequate health care, secure homes, if they are indeed family?

God weeps as God looks on what we are doing, on what we are contemplating doing to one other. The just war theory, amongst other things, postulates that a legitimate authority declares and wages war. A war against Iraq declared unilaterally by the United States would be one not declared by a legitimate authority and so would be immoral. God smiles through the tears to see the many who oppose this war.

This is a great, great country, a generous country, a compassionate country, a country that helped Nelson Mandela come out of prison, a country which helped make South Africa free and democratic. That is your legacy, your tradition. Why want to tarnish it with a war most of the world opposes? Help to wipe the tears from God's eyes. For God says, "Yes you and you and you, you can make a difference. You can help me realize my dream that my children, my children, you are family."