

FINDING MEANING THROUGH LITERATURE
LIVING LIKE PHILIP ROTH'S *GHOST WRITER*

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
August 4, 2013

Today's readings from Lukeⁱ and Hoseaⁱⁱ are all about misplaced values: in particular turning against one's family in the service of self-interest and materialism – turning against one's very people and their God in favor of a foreign people and their foreign gods. In Hosea, God speaks of his fatherly love for the nation of Israel, taking it up into his arms and feeding it and then teaching it to walk. God led the people of Israel “with cords of human kindness, with bands of love,”ⁱⁱⁱ but in return the more he called them, the more they turned away from him. In Luke, Jesus is asked by someone in the crowd to intervene in his family affairs and order his brother to divide the family inheritance with him. Clearly, this is not a family flourishing in peace and harmony, and Jesus warns the family member against greed, reminding him that “one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”^{iv} Jesus goes on to tell the crowd a parable about a rich man laying up possessions for himself so that he can hedonistically “relax, eat, drink and be merry,”^v ignoring the fact that he could drop dead at any minute and that there are fundamental values like good relationships with family and with God that should take precedence.

This may seem like a simple message being preached by both Hosea and Jesus: Get your values straight by returning to familial love and love of God. But it's fascinating how easily we can forget and instead pursue self-interest and materialism. A novel that explores this in depth and virtuosity is *The Ghost Writer* by Philip Roth. A son becomes alienated from his father by putting his family and his people, the Jews, in a bad light in order selfishly to pursue his own career interests. Yet, the reader comes to sympathize to a significant extent with the son in his exercise of artistic freedom and in his demonstrated talent. It's not always cut and dried how one can both follow one's own sense of vocation, becoming self-actualized, and also maintain important relational values with one's family and one's tribe. Today's sermon, the third in my series on "Finding Meaning Through Literature," is intended to play out the nuances of the biblical lessons from Hosea and Luke. It's intended to explore how difficult and complex it can often be to get one's values prioritized properly.

The so-called Ghost Writer is a young author, twenty-three years old, named Nathan Zuckerman, who's had some early success in getting four short stories published in literary quarterlies. At the beginning of Roth's novel, we meet Nathan in the Berkshire Mountains on the Massachusetts-New York border, where he has a winter fellowship at an artist's retreat center. After sending his stories to a famous but reclusive Jewish fiction writer who lives near the artist colony, he's been invited to the house of "the region's most original storyteller since Melville and Hawthorne" for afternoon conversation and dinner.

We quickly learn that Nathan has recently become estranged from his own father in Newark, New Jersey, because he's written a short story based on the moral shortcomings of some of his relatives, which don't reflect well on Jews. It was an old family feud for which his father had tried to play peacemaker for two years before the relatives ended up in a nasty court battle. His father had begged Nathan not to publish the story because it was all about a financial inheritance being greedily fought over by siblings. In brief, here's how the father explains his objections: "Nathan, your story, as far as Gentiles are concerned, is about one thing and one thing only... It is about kikes. Kikes and their love of money. That is all our good Christian friends will see, I guarantee you."^{vi}

Soon thereafter Nathan receives a letter at the artist colony from a Newark judge who's a friend of his podiatrist father and who wrote Nathan a recommendation for the University of Chicago, where Nathan was admitted and attended college. Among other things, the judge asks these questions: "If you had been living in Nazi Germany in the thirties, would you have written such a story? Do you believe Shakespeare's Shylock and Dickens' Fagin have been of no use to anti-Semites? ...Would you claim that the characters in your story represent a fair sample of the kinds of people that make up a typical contemporary community of Jews? ...Aside from the financial gain to yourself, what benefit do you think publishing this story in a national magazine will have for (a) your family; (b) your community; (c) the Jewish religion; (d) the well-being of the Jewish people?"^{vii}

Nathan's defense is that (1) it's now 1956, more than a decade after the Holocaust, and this is America, not Nazi Germany, so Jews are not at risk; (2) it's a good story; (3) it's actually based on things that did happen in his family; (4) it's art, and artistic freedom has to be zealously defended for the good of everyone.

But it turns out that Nathan is at least subconsciously conflicted about publishing the story. This comes through most clearly in a chapter where Nathan seems to convince himself that a woman about his age from the Harvard library, who's currently staying in the famous author's house to help sort through his manuscripts for potential deposit with the university, is actually Anne Frank. That is, Nathan believes he has evidence that Anne Frank actually survived the death camps but didn't want to go public about her survival so that her diary as a dead girl could continue to have the extraordinary effect it was having on American and European readers and theatre-goers, building sympathy and understanding for Jews. Not only that, he surmises that this particular woman has the right accent, the right physical appearance, apparent scar tissue on her arm where her camp number had been tattooed, and the right immigration history, so that she could really be Anne Frank. Then Nathan goes on to fanaticize returning home to his father in New Jersey and having this exchange: "I met a marvelous woman while I was up in New England. I love her and she loves me. We are going to be married.' 'Married? But so fast? Nathan, is she Jewish?' 'Yes she is.' 'But who is she?' 'Ann Frank.'"^{viii} "Oh, how I

have misunderstood my son,” Nathan’s father would then say. “How mistaken we have been.”^{ix}

How is this story helpful to us today, both in understanding the scripture lessons and in living our own lives going forward? I think it’s a wonderful illustration of the importance of balancing personal ambition with social awareness – of balancing individualism with community responsibility. Both have their place, so it’s not a zero-sum game of self versus others. But we can go badly awry is when greed and materialism trump generosity and relationship. Nathan actually has both dimensions: he wants to produce good art and advance in his career, but he’s also concerned about his family and the Jewish people. Whether he lets greed get the best of him, though, is still the question.

Nathan explains early in the book that his father loves him virtually unconditionally – “I could ask the world [of him] any day of the week.”^x He exclaims, “Oh, what sitting ducks I had for parents! A son of theirs would have to be a half-wit or a sadist *not* to make them proud. And I was neither; I was dutiful and thoughtful.”^{xi} He understands that his father is a foot doctor and not an artist and therefore understandably bewildered by Nathan’s short story. As the father says to Nathan, “This story isn’t us, and what is worse, it isn’t even *you*. You are a loving boy... I’ve watched you all your life. You are a good and kind and considerate young man. You are not someone who writes this kind of story and then pretends it’s the truth.” Nathan responds, just before he gets on a bus to begin his journey to the artist colony,

“But I did write it. I *am* the kind of person who writes this kind of story.”^{xii} Once up in the Berkshires, he seeks out the famous Jewish author, as he puts it, “to submit myself for candidacy as nothing less than...[his] spiritual son, to petition for his moral sponsorship and to win, if I could, the magical protection of his advocacy and his love.”^{xiii} Nathan rejects his birth father and seeks a new Jewish father within his career as a writer – someone who will provide him both moral and spiritual mentorship.

Ultimately, though, Nathan finds that his new father is also flawed. He’s so married to his writing that he ignores his wife, who’s named Hope. The only day they get any time together – to eat a late breakfast, read the newspaper, and go for a walk in the woods – is on Sundays, but this author’s always “haunted by the loss of all that good time.” He explains to Nathan, “I’m nearly crazy at the prospect of all those unusable hours. I’m restless, I’m bad-tempered, but she’s a human being too, you see, so I go.”^{xiv} It also turns out that this author has had an affair with the young Anne Frank look-alike who’s helping him with his manuscripts. So, by the last chapter of the book, Hope is trying to leave their marital home, saying, “Let her try to please you...! Let her serve as the backdrop for your thoughts for thirty-five years. Let her see how noble and heroic you are by the twenty-seventh draft. Let her cook you wonderful meals and light candles for your dinner....” Then she addresses the young woman directly: “”There is his religion of art, my young successor: rejecting life! *Not* living is what he makes his beautiful fiction *out* of! And you will now be the person he

is not living with!” Nathan, as he listens to these words is saying to himself, “Oh, Father, is this so, were you the lover of this lovesick, worshipful, displaced daughter half your age? ...You succumbed too? Can that be? *You?*”^{xv}

Then, as the author is heading out the door after his wife, who’s run off down the driveway, he turns to Nathan, saying, “You must have things to write down. There’s paper on my desk.” “Paper for what?” Nathan asks. “Your feverish notes,” the author responds. “You had an earful this morning.” The author goes on, “I’ll be curious to see how we all come out someday. It could be an interesting story. You’re not so nice and polite in your fiction... You’re a different person.” When Nathan responds, “Am I?” the author quips, “I should hope so,” and then takes off after his wife.^{xvi}

So, there seems to be a potential endemic conflict between being a writer and being a nice human being -- between personal ambition and familial and communal loyalties. It may be similar for many of us as we negotiate our work lives and our personal lives. Nathan may well be taking it a step further, though: to the level of personal greed and materialism supplanting generosity and genuine relationships. The reader is left wondering how far Nathan has gone and how far he will go. Jesus reminds us, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not exist in the abundance of possessions.”^{xvii} Hosea reminds us, “I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love...[but] My people are bent on turning away from me.”^{xviii}

There are certain things we can't own, and it behooves us to understand that we're simply part of all that is, in the vast flowing river of life. We do have mutual responsibilities to protect each other from bigotry and oppression. We're called upon to join as partners in creating a future free from want and fear. We're invited into a shared endeavor that all may have abundant life and peace endure forever.^{xix} May we hear and heed that call.

BENEDICTION

Go in peace. Live simply, gently, at home in yourselves.

Act justly. Speak justly. Remember the depth of your own compassion.

Forget not your power in the days of your powerlessness. AMEN.

Mark L. Belletini

NOTES

ⁱ Luke 12:13-21.

ⁱⁱ Hosea 11:1-11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hosea 11:4.

^{iv} Luke 12:15.

^v Luke 12:19.

^{vi} Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 94.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, pp. 157-158.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 159.

^x *Ibid.*, p. 9.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 80.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 9.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 18.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, pp. 173-175.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, pp. 179-180.

^{xvii} Luke 12:15.

^{xviii} Hosea 11:3-4, 7.

^{xix} Ruth Duck, "We Cannot Own the Sunlit Sky," [Hymn] (G.I.A publications, 1989).