

## Facing the Future in Edson's "Wit"

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan

University Public Worship

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"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest," says Jesus in today's gospel lesson.<sup>i</sup> "For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." We're here in a church in the midst of a great university, where we cherish wisdom and intelligence. But Jesus, according to Matthew, says "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants."

Today begins a four-week summer sermon series on "Finding Meaning Through Literature." I'll be examining a couple of plays and a couple of novels with you, in relation to the lectionary readings of the day from the Bible. I believe that Margaret Edson's Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Wit*,<sup>ii</sup> does a nice job of explicating today's gospel reading. In it a distinguished fifty year-old university professor of seventeenth century English poetry demonstrates her wisdom, intelligence, and, indeed, wit, related to her chosen specialty: analysis of the Holy Sonnets of John Donne. But as she's diagnosed with terminal ovarian cancer, as her treatments proceed, and as she faces the future, she begins to realize the importance of the emotional and spiritual dimensions of life -- what Jesus means by gentleness and humility, and how to find rest for her soul. What's revealed to infants in Margaret Wise Brown's children's book *Runaway Bunny* ultimately becomes much more important for this professor in terms of life's meaning than her intellectual understanding of Donne's *Holy Sonnets*.

Early in the play we're introduced to a couple of characters who share the main character Vivian Bearing's dedication to the mind over the heart. Dr. Harvey Kelekian, also fifty years old

and the chief of medical oncology at the University Hospital, presents Vivian with the diagnosis of advanced metastatic ovarian cancer and his experimental treatment plan in an unemotional, unsympathetic, clinically-precise manner. He states that they that he will be "relying on ... [her] resolve to withstand some of the more pernicious side effects of the chemotherapy ("Do you think you can be very tough?")<sup>iii</sup> Professor E.M. Ashford, her PhD, advisor, is depicted twenty-eight years earlier as telling her, "Your essay on Holy Sonnet Six...is a melodrama, with a veneer of scholarship, unworthy of you -- to say nothing of Donne. Do it again." The professor adds, "You must begin with a text, Miss Bearing, not with a feeling."<sup>iv</sup> We learn that Vivian now thinks the salient characteristic of John Donne's poetry is wit, which she claims that for a better-than-average undergraduate "provides an invaluable exercise for sharpening the mental faculties, for stimulating the flash of comprehension that can only follow hours of exacting and seemingly pointless scrutiny."<sup>v</sup>

Then there's the primary nurse in the Cancer Inpatient Unit, Susie Monahan. She's sensitive, kind, attentive to how Vivian is feeling and what her needs are. She rubs her face and neck with a washcloth when she has a fever, along with administering the doctor-ordered medications.

One of the great ironies is that the poetry for which Vivian is one of the world's experts, John Donne's Holy Sonnets, are all about life, death and God, about metaphysical quandaries. But she sees Donne as dealing with them only through wit: "Ingenuity, virtuosity, and a vigorous intellect that jousts with the most exalted concepts."<sup>vi</sup> Vivian quotes poetry like this as illustration:

If lecherous goats, if serpents envious  
Cannot be damn'd; Alas; why should I bee?  
Why should intent or reason, borne in mee,  
Make sinnes, else equall, in mee, more heinous?

And mercy being easie, 'and glorious  
To God, in his sterne wrath, why threatens hee?<sup>vii</sup>

Yet, Vivian comes to realize that in the hospital, under the care of another university professor who's also chief of medical oncology, it's not relevant that she's a renowned expert on John Donne, the metaphysical quandaries don't matter, and wit is useless. To Dr. Kelekian, she is simply her ovaries. She will end up as a medical journal article about a particular kind of very intense chemotherapy applied to her peritoneal cavity when it was crawling with cancer.<sup>viii</sup>

It's different with Susie, with whom she has this conversation at four in the morning:

You can't sleep?  
No. I just keep thinking.  
If you do that too much, you can get kind of confused.  
I know. I can't figure things out. I'm in a...*quandary*, having these...*doubts*.  
What you're doing is very hard.  
Hard things are what I like best.  
It's not the same. It's like it's out of control, isn't it?  
(*Vivian starts*) *crying, in spite of herself*) I'm scared.  
(*With Susie*) *stroking her*) Oh, honey, of course you are.  
I want...  
I know, it's hard.  
I don't feel sure of myself anymore.  
And you used to feel sure.  
(*Crying*) Oh, yes, I used to feel sure.  
It's all right. I know. It hurts. I know. It's all right. Do you want a  
tissue? It's all right. (*Silence*) Vivian, would you like a Popsicle?  
Yes, please.  
I'll get it for you. I'll be right back.  
Thanks you.<sup>ix</sup>

And then as Susie leaves, Vivian reverts to her old rational self in an aside to the audience: "The epithelial cells in my GI tract have been killed by the chemo. The cold Popsicle feels good, it's something I can digest, and it helps keep me hydrated. For your information."<sup>x</sup>

Later she says to the audience, and to herself, "That certainly was a *maudlin* display. Popsicles?... ['Honey'] I can't believe my life has become so...corny. But it can't be helped. I don't see any other way. We are discussing life and death, and not in the abstract, either; we are

discussing *my* life and *my* death... Now is not the time for verbal swordplay... for metaphysical conceit, for wit... Now is a time for simplicity. Now is a time for, dare I say it, kindness."<sup>xi</sup>

Near the end of the play, when Vivian is taking a lot of morphine for intense pain, her now eighty year-old advisor, Professor E.M. Ashford, visits her at her hospital bedside. Professor Ashford's in town visiting her five year-old great-grandson. When she sees what kind of pain Vivian is in, the old professor does something rather out of character. She slips off her shoes, climbs up on Vivian's bed, puts her arm around her, and asks if she'd like to hear some of Donne's poetry. "Noooooooo," moans Vivian. So Professor Ashford takes one of the books she's bought for her great-grandson out of her shopping bag and begins reading, while Vivian slips in and out of sleep. It's *The Runaway Bunny*, written by Margaret Wise Brown and first published in 1942. Here's some of the dialogue:

Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother,  
"I am running away."  
"If you run away," said his mother, "I will run after you. For you are my little bunny."  
"If you run after me," said the little bunny, "I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you."  
"If you become a fish in a trout stream," said his mother, "I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you."

Now Professor Ashford, thinking out loud, says, "Look at that. A little allegory of the soul. No matter where it hides, God will find it. See, Vivian?" All Vivian can do is moan in response, "Uhhhhhh." Professor Ashford keeps reading:

"If you become a fisherman," said the little bunny, "I will be a bird and fly away from you."  
If you become a bird and fly away from me," said his mother, "I will be a tree that you can come home to."  
"Very clever," [Professor Ashford says to herself].  
"Shucks," said the little bunny, "I might as well stay where I am and be your little bunny.  
And so he did.  
"Have a carrot," said the mother bunny.

[And Professor Ashford says to herself] "Wonderful"

By this time Vivian is fast asleep. The professor slowly gets off the bed and gathers her things. Then she leans over and kisses Vivian.<sup>xii</sup> The tough professor who once belittled feelings seems to have learned something.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest... For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls... I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants."<sup>xiii</sup>

The playwright, Margaret Edson, has explained her purpose in creating a character like Vivian: "I wanted to talk about a person's relationship with grace--meaning the flow of harmony in and out of her life, her relationship with God, and her growing awareness of her own self as a person with a soul and the capacity for love. And the best way to talk about that was to show a person who had none of these attributes and show her gradually coming into them."<sup>xiv</sup>

John Donne is said to have been struggling deeply with his Christian faith when he wrote the Holy Sonnets. In a poem entitled, "The Triple Foole," he writes:

I thought, if I could draw my paines,  
Through Rimes vexation, I should them allay,  
Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,  
For, he tames it, that fetters it in verse.

But Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." Biographers suggest that Donne's Holy Sonnets were the ruminations of a man in spiritual crisis. He wrestles with questions of faith, God's mercy and judgment, human mortality and the immortality of the soul, sin, damnation, absolution and salvation. "The Holy Sonnets are the product of a doubter, one who has not yet found inner peace."<sup>xv</sup> By the end of his life, though, Donne "discerned a divine

purpose directing it. He felt that God had used him as an instrument of his power and grace, and had brought him to a safe haven," according to one of his biographers.<sup>xvi</sup> Then, life isn't something to be feared any more than death. Margaret Edson's play likewise "isn't a tearful lecture on how to die," according to a *Boston Globe* reviewer. "It's a dry-eyed lesson on how to live--with simplicity and kindness."<sup>xvii</sup>

Might we all be gentle and humble in heart, emulating Jesus, and not just witty, wise, and intelligent as universities seem to call for. Then we may be able to find rest, not just at the end, but all along life's path.

## **BENEDICTION**

Lead us, O God, from death to life, from falsehood to truth.

Lead us from despair to hope, from fear to trust.

Lead us from hate to love, and let peace fill our hearts,

our world, our universe.

AMEN.

(Project Ploughshares)

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30.

<sup>ii</sup> Margaret Edson, *Wit* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1999).

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49, citing John Donne, "If Poysonous Mineralls."

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 78-80.

<sup>xiii</sup> Matthew 11: 28-29.

<sup>xiv</sup> Carol Cohen, "Margaret Edson's *Wit* - An Audience Guide" (Madison, Wisconsin: Madison Repertory Theater, August 21, 2000).

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*, citing Robert Cecil Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*, citing a *Boston Globe* review.