

No Hard Feelings
Epiphany 2, Year A
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Every Christmas my family gets together for a few days at the beach. I say this casually, but it is actually a big deal. We drive and fly in to the panhandle of Florida from substantial distances— to the land of our childhood, our raising. We arrive somewhat exhausted— two clergy families spent from extensive Christmas services and two families arriving from other family visits. There are 18 people in all, my mom is the center of the gathering, and we live in fairly intense community for about 4 days.

It's fun; it's heartwarming; it's challenging; it's nerve wracking; it's joyful; it's stressful; and my siblings and I have decided it's totally worth it, so we commit to show up, year after year after year. But, as an eternal middle child, I always have plenty to process from this gathering. And on the drive back to Savannah with the boys, after a flat tire outside of Tallahassee, with Michael already in Valdosta, taking care of his parents, I had a sort of religious experience— an Epiphany you might say:

Ethan was driving, it was a gorgeous winter afternoon. The sun was moving towards the west and the moon was rising. We were listening to the Avett Brothers— a popular band that played at the Savannah Music Festival last year. In fact, I saw many Christ Church members at the concert! Ethan and I were listening to a song called, "No Hard Feelings." And I was feeling both full and empty, as I often do after these family gatherings. And as I listened to the words of

the song, and looked at the expansive sky, and felt the companionship of my almost-adult son,
my heart caught a glimpse of the bigger picture.

Here are some of the lyrics:

*When my body won't hold me anymore
And it finally lets me free
Will I be ready?
When my feet won't walk another mile
And my lips give their last kiss goodbye
Will my hands be steady?
When I lay down my fears, my hopes and my doubts
The rings on my fingers and the keys to my house
With no hard feelings
Lord knows they haven't done
Much good for anyone
Kept me afraid and cold
With so much to have and hold
When my body won't hold me anymore
And it finally lets me free
Where will I go?
Will the trade winds take me south
Through Georgia grain or tropical rain
Or snow from the heavens?
Will I join with the ocean blue
Or run into the savior true
And shake hands laughing
And walk through the night
Straight to the light
Holding the love I've known in my life
And no hard feelings
Lord knows they haven't done
Much good for anyone
Kept me afraid and cold
With so much to have and hold
Under the curving sky
I'm finally learning why
It matters for me and you
To say it and mean it too
For life and its loveliness
And all of its ugliness. Good as it's been to me
I have no enemies*

I wanted to try to express to you why this song took me to a bigger place, spiritually speaking. But I found a writer who offers a great analysis, so I will share Matthew Becklo's words. He writes:

Like all great songs, "No Hard Feelings" is about a great many things. It's about gratitude for having been given the chance to live in this world and experience all its pain and beauty. It's about the power of mercy and letting things go, and the way arrogance, resentment, and rage never deliver on their promises.

It's about how so much of our discord with each other (to paraphrase Thomas Merton) really comes down to discord with ourselves, which is ultimately discord with God.

At the heart of all of this is really a song about finitude. "No Hard Feelings" is a reminder that life is beautiful because it ends; that letting things go is good and necessary because eventually we have to let everything go; and that if we don't unmask the source of discord in life, we might find ourselves surprised by it in death. Facing this fact – that all our projects (including our politics) end in "ash and dust" – impels us to be humble and empathetic; to treat each other not as abstract enemies (political or otherwise) but as brothers and sisters; and to know God now, harvesting the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control while we still have breath in our lungs.

I am grateful for artists, like the Avett brothers, who can capture the journey of the soul in music and invite us to travel along, and that is what today's Gospel describes— an invitation. An invitation from one friend to another to experience THE vision— the Epiphany that is Jesus Christ. Philip has met Jesus, and been completely transformed. Now he wants his friend, Nathanael, to share in the experience. Come meet Jesus, Philip says. He is the one we have been waiting for. Nathanael responds from that cynical place where most of us spend most of our time— "Where's this guy from— Nazareth? Are you kidding me, can anything good come out of Nazareth?????" Philip says the best response to his friend, one we can all remember especially when we invite friends to Church— **come and see.**

When Nathanael meets Jesus, he has the complete experience of being known, loved and forgiven. This is the same experience described repeatedly by those who meet Jesus throughout Scripture and our tradition. In meeting Jesus, Nathanael experiences an Epiphany of being fully known and fully loved. And In the face of Jesus, Nathanael sees God.

We all long for an Epiphany— we all long to catch a vision of something bigger, transcendent, true and holy. The spiritual writer, Richard Rohr, teaches that new vision can only be born out of two paths— the path of wonder and the path of suffering. Of course, I would prefer the path of wonder! Rohr teaches that when you allow yourself to be led in awe and wonder, and you have that aha moment, you should try to consciously stay with it for 15 seconds — to imprint the experience on your neurons. Rohr is a teacher of contemplation, and he says that fear, negativity and hatred stick like Velcro to the nerves of our brain and appreciation and gratitude slide away like Teflon from these same nerves.

He defines contemplation as the positive, loving, non-argumentative savoring of the moment and this practice is one of the main sources of Epiphanies— practices that actually transform the brain and create new paradigms for thought. The other pathway is that of suffering— not so preferable but totally inevitable. We know that when we suffer greatly, we find ourselves at that place of searching, seeking, openness, because all our control systems have failed, and we are more open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. That is, if we don't shut down.

Yesterday, I will say I had another Epiphany. And this experience was one born of suffering. As I entered the church for T. Gongaware's funeral, singing "Lift High Cross," the sunlight once again so lovely, the flowers, the music, the faces, Christ Church, T. It was so heartbreakingly beautiful, and , despite my deep sorrow, I felt like Nathanael when he met Jesus

— known and loved and in the presence of God. And our dear friend, T, had led us there. Come and see.

Today another songwriter offers us a pathway towards Epiphany. This songwriter lived a long time ago, but like the Avett brothers, wrote from the heart. The psalmist for today, sings a song of what it feels like to be in the presence of God. To be known and loved and free. I will close with this song and may our hearts and minds be transformed with the wonder of it all:

Lord, you have searched me out and known me;
You know my sitting down and my rising up;
You discern my thoughts from afar
You trace my journeys and my resting-places
And are acquainted with all my ways.
Indeed there is not a word on my lips,
But you, O Lord, know it altogether.
You press upon me behind and before
And lay your hand upon me
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is so high I cannot attain to it.
For you yourself created my inmost parts
You know me together in my mother's womb
I will thank you because I am marvelously made
Your works are wonderful and I know it well.

Amen