

“What Do You Want Me to Do for You?”  
Faith and the Passion of Unknowing<sup>1</sup>

Commencement Reflections  
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by

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Mark 10: 46-52

“I pray God to rid me of God.” *Meister Eckhart.*

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase is John Caputo’s in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997). I am indebted to Caputo for providing both a context and the inspiration for articulating my own understanding of “faith as the passion for life.”

Let me take a moment to congratulate the Class of 2008 on your graduation today. Let me also congratulate all the proud parents, vigilant guardians, family, relatives, and friends here today – for your support, sacrifice, faith in and for, your graduates. My congratulations also go to the Seminary staff, faculty, administration, as well as to the members of the Board of Trustees, alumni/ae and other faithful supporters of New York Theological Seminary, for ensuring that our students are adequately educated for this day and beyond. Thank you everyone for making this day possible.

I also wanted to take an additional moment to say that I am grateful to my faculty colleagues, who, in their desire to show their Academic Dean their support – or, maybe, in an effort to get even – gave me the task of delivering the Commencement Sermon this morning, which I proceeded immediately to rename “Commencement Reflections” just to make sure that I won’t be found guilty of “false advertisement” – just in case.

This strategy of “re-naming” is probably the last lesson I will give to this graduating class: When in doubt, break the rules by re-casting the terms of the discussion; well, maybe, just bend the rules a little bit – right, Mr. President? Madame Associate Dean? Madame Faculty Chair?

I want Dr. Hunt, and all the excellent preachers among my colleagues, as well as all of you in this hall who are preachers and preachers-to-be, to know that even though I have never taken a preaching course in my entire life, I know what a “real” sermon looks and feels like. I just don’t know how to do one.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my reflections in my own way, which I have brought under the title, “What Do You Want Me to Do for You? Faith and the Passion of Unknowing.”

Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord. Amen.

### **Faith is the passion of unknowing.**

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to visit the Louvre in Paris. What made a profound impression on me, aside from its archival magnificence, was the sixteenth century Italian artist Daniele de Volterra’s “The Virgin at the Foot of the Cross.” What especially spoke to me, borrowing the words of John Caputo, were her “tears of passion, the passion of her tears, and the blindness of eyes blurred by tears.”

The “eyes of faith,” my friends, are eyes that are blind – although not blinded. In order for me to have faith, I have to be blind – and *must* remain blind, even though part of the life of faith is to struggle to overcome being blinded by certain things, to struggle to transform those things that blind us, and to struggle to defeat the blindness that conceals our blindness.

Our philosophical inheritance valued sight over all the other senses. Thus, the Greeks often explained blindness as punishment, if not tragedy. In contrast, our Hebraic legacy, particularly, where God is concerned, often recognized and celebrated the continual revelation of God through God’s constant withdrawal from “sight.” Yahweh speaks to Moses through a “burning bush.” God wrestles with Jacob “in the darkness.” God hides “his face” in order to protect the life of her people. Lurianic Kabbalah called this the “*tzim-tzum*” of God, i.e., God’s contraction or self-limitation for the benefit of creation.

There is no need to turn blindness into a vice or a virtue. One need only accept one’s blindness as a condition of faith. “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Why? Because, the God of the First and Second Testaments, the God of the Apostle’s Creed, the God of Martin Luther King, Jr. and of Monsignor Romero, is a God who is almost always “out of sight.” This is a God who withdraws – is absent, one might say – in order not only to be more fully present with God’s people, but, more important, in order to create the space so that God’s people can be free to be fully and truly themselves. Many of the Christian mystics did not tire of reminding the people of their time that God was beyond God. For them this was not merely a theological argument to secure the transcendence of God, thereby preserving God’s “freedom.” This is an affirmation of the ethical necessity of emptying one’s self in order that one can be filled by the “fundamentally new which is also fundamentally better.”

And what of one’s tears of passion, the passion of tears, and the blindness of eyes blurred by tears? It is said that tears are the traces of the connection of the body with the deepest passions of life: joy and sorrow, agony and ecstasy, birth and death. We cry when we are truly happy; we cry when we are truly sad; we seldom cry, if at all, when we are neither. Indeed, tears are the inseparable companions of passion. Tears also cover what our eyes often see but cannot accept; just as tears wash away those things that prevent the eyes from seeing what we need to see. Whatever else might be said about tears, there is no doubt that they signal our passionate relatedness to – our desire for – the depths of human and divine life: God, neighbor, the beloved. They signal this passionate connection by “blinding the eye” as, through weeping, they cover the eyes, while uncovering the heart, and, in this blindness, prepares the way for a different kind of seeing: sight through the “eyes of faith.” To have faith, in other words, one must not only be blind, but also, one must be blinded by one’s passionate tears. “Jesus wept.”

### **Faith, dear colleagues, is the passion of unknowing.**

I have often described faith as a “burning desire and passion in my heart,” drawing on the language of the Emmaus Road narrative. I understood this to mean that faith may be re(written) or re(read) as a passion for something to come, and this “something to come” is inextricably related to the fact that *faith is the passion of unknowing*. Our experience of God is almost always as a “hidden” God who discloses herself at the precise moment that he withdraws. Not unlike de Volterra’s “Virgin at the foot of the Cross” we are often blinded by our tears – the tears of passion and the passion of tears that connect us with the depths of both human and divine life. Here the *conditions* of faith often arrive before us as an *aporia*, i.e., an undecidable and ungrounded space, where no path is ‘clear and given,’ where no ‘certain knowledge opens up the way in advance,’ where no ‘decision is already made...’

But, the decisions of faith are made and re (made) by way of the undecidable. And, that which moves us through the undecidable is the “passion for something to come”: the “desire for the beloved” (as in the Song of Solomon), “the hunger for justice” (as in Amos), the “love for God” (as in I John). Indeed, as Caputo rightly declares, “undecidability does not mean the apathy of indecision but the passion of faith, the urgency of forging ahead where one does not see, where in principle one cannot see, where what is at issue is nothing to be seen...but, a matter of giving, of giving witness, of responding to a call that addresses us in the blind, the call of something *tout autre*, something out of sight, with the passion of God.” Here, Bartimaeus’ cry of faith returns to us in a new way.

### **Faith, beloved graduates, is the passion of unknowing.**

The story of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar who is literally “the son of Timaeus,” the “one who is honored,” unfolds before our eyes. Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, along the same road that Israel’s faithful take on their way to the temple in Jerusalem. The route is filled with pilgrims desirous of receiving a blessing that they could take with them to the temple. And, as we all know, beggars, blind folk, the widows, the poor, were, in that culture, sources of blessing – you give to the poor, the poor, in return give you a blessing to take with you on your pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Bartimaeus knew this. We can see him dispensing blessings – “Alms for this blind man,” he cries out. I am sure many people along the way gave him money, maybe food. “Have mercy on me, a poor blind beggar... Alms... alms for this poor blind beggar. Have mercy on me.” But that is just the point. He asked only for alms. Nothing more. Perhaps, he did not know how to ask for more; perhaps, he was afraid to ask for more. Perhaps, he had asked before, and was given something else; or given nothing.

Then, he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was passing through. And as Jesus was moving through the crowds around him, Mark tells us that Bartimaeus cries out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Not to be deterred by the crowds, or the disciples

who tried to keep him away from Jesus, as Eugene Peterson tells the story in his *The Message*, he cried again, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” We know from tradition that the name “Son of David,” in fact, trembles with messianic expectation. Bartimaeus sees Jesus as the Messiah, the Holy One of Israel.

Mark tells us, Jesus stopped and said to his disciples, “Call him;” which they did, almost reluctantly. And now, we see Jesus and Bartimaeus, face-to-face, with the crowds swirling around them like a herd – and then, clearly, quietly, we hear Jesus addressing Bartimaeus: “What do you want me to do for you?”

Here is the question that interrupts, if not ruptures, the everyday life of the herd. I can imagine the long years Bartimaeus spent on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem; I can hear his countless, well-rehearsed, cries, “Have mercy on me, a poor blind beggar.” Friends, can you not see Bartimaeus asking for nothing more than alms; and, the pilgrims along the way to Jerusalem seeking a blessing, giving exactly what he asked for – alms – and most likely, not asking about what Bartimaeus wanted, assuming with great relief, that all that was being asked was for alms; asking no questions; giving without thinking; giving from the heart as much as from out of one’s obligation; but giving with the expectation of reward; giving conditionally?

But Jesus asks, “What do *you* want me to do for you?” In the midst of the multitudes swirling and moving and jostling towards Jerusalem, Jesus, interrupts everyday life and asks – no, dares to risk – a question that just might encourage Bartimaeus to ask for what he really wanted. “Master, let me receive my sight again.” The word Bartimaeus uses, I am told by my friend and colleague Jerry Reisig, is *anablepo*, which literally means “to see again” suggesting that Bartimaeus was not always without sight.

When was the last time we asked a question which interrupted power and privilege? Or that ruptured the boundaries of time, space, and place out of the sheer weight and density of hospitality? When did we last ask a neighbor “What do *you* want me to do for you?”

Jesus’ answer was even more wonder-filled. “Go your way,” he says to Bartimaeus, “your faith has made you well.” No fanfare this time; no washing in the pool of an illustrious ancestor; no reference to God’s glory or power; no healing ritual; no showing of one’s self to the High Priests. “Go, your way, your faith has made you well.” That is all. And immediately Bartimaeus received his sight and followed him on the way... followed him on the way to Jerusalem... and probably, into the suffering and death of this man, Jesus, who dared to ask in such a way that the Other could give the answer of his heart. Who dared to stop when everyone else was moving. Who dared to ask, “What do you want me to do for you?”

## **Faith, my sisters and brothers, is the passion of unknowing.**

I began these reflections with a comment about Daniele de Volterra's "Virgin at the foot of the Cross." I wish to conclude with another picture, if you will, one perhaps more familiar, but equally evocative and instructive for faith as the passion of unknowing. This is the image of Mary Magdalene, waiting at the mouth of the empty Tomb.

This image speaks most directly to my heart. For it is the portrait of one who loved someone enough to wait in the darkness and danger of early morning, and to plead with the gardener through her tears of passion and the passion of her tears – "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away." Indeed, the image of Mary, waiting at the mouth of the empty Tomb – waiting in the face of unknowing, one might say – is a portrait of loving, transforming, humility. It is this drama that puts us in touch with the depths of the struggles for life against death, which often elude us because the fullness of life often refuses to remember death, and indeed, seeks to hide from it.

It is this kind of waiting which Jesus, on the way from Jericho to Jerusalem embodies as he stops – waits, if you will – for the first time by asking the question that brings forth life: "What do you want me to do for you?" And, waits, a second time for Bartimaeus to answer the question that lies in his heart of hearts, "Master, let me receive my sight again." Jesus must stop and wait – at least twice – because this question, at its heart, is a question that can arise only out of one who waits, and can only be asked by those who know how to wait. Those of us who cannot wait often cannot ask the question for which many in need have waited for so many lifetimes.

Surely, Mary's waiting was not passive; not surrender; not acquiescence. Hers was the kind akin to those who struggle against all odds; those who resist domination; those who are in solidarity with the excluded, the marginal, the victimized. Indeed, the portrait of Mary reminds me of those in our world who wait for us to ask them the question – this question that addresses not just their need, but their freedom. "What do *you* want me to do for you?"

We know in our heart of hearts that our world is full of those who wait for their Lord, who not unlike Mary, plead with the gardener – in other words, with anyone who might listen: the AIDS patient who is refused treatment and will therefore most likely die alone; gays and lesbians who struggle to be citizens of our communities but are often shunned politely for re-awakening our heterosexual fears; those whom we exclude from our communities – in Japan it is the *burakumin*, in India it is the *Dalits*, in Australia it is the aboriginal peoples; the women in a patriarchal, sexist society, the people of color in a racist society, the poor in affluent societies; the voiceless, the powerless, the homeless-- indeed, anyone who, in the face of some lack in their lives, often not of their own making, wait upon the Lord for grace, and truth, and love; who wait sometimes out of their need but often for their freedom.

Mary is my greatest teacher about the meaning of faith as the passion of unknowing. For without this loving, transforming passionate humility our world is not likely to discover life – at least, not the kind offered freely by the God of Life who is also the God who is passionately absent – who withdraws into the darkness so that we might enter into his marvelous light – this God who reaches for us in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ whom we recognize some of the time, but surely, not all of the time.

**Faith is the passion of unknowing.**

Let us pray.

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” “What do you want me to do for you?”  
“Master, let me receive my sight again.” “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” And immediately the people of God received their sight and followed Jesus. Amen.