

Trade Your Mirrors for Binoculars

Feb. 16, 2008 ~ APCE San Diego

James 1:19-25

Text: “But be doers of the word and not merely hearers...”

He lies at rest only three blocks from my house, in the old Brighton cemetery just up a cliff over the busy highway 490 that once was the bed of the Erie Canal. Few people seem to know it’s there-- not the grave, nor the cemetery hidden so well in plain sight. The gravesite is mere steps from where its sleeping tenant, William Clough Bloss, used to run a tavern, plying mule drivers with spirits. I’ve come to think of him as “the bartender of Brighton.”

My husband discovered the cemetery, and this particular grave, one day several years ago while out walking the dog. Now he and I visit the Bloss family’s plot every so often-- there where wife Mary and son Joseph-- one of his six children-- lie beside him; and we often take out-of-town friends to stand in the dead leaves and squint to make out the large monument’s weathered lettering for themselves. Bet you’re thinking “that’s hardly a thrilling tourist destination!” but not one of us who’s seen it has failed to fall silent in the presence of such a history as the plain brass plaque records. It’s the kind of history that makes you want to stand there in the wind, even in near-zero chill, to take notes.

There are the obligatory dates that position his fleeting footnote in history: “Born @ West Stockbridge, MA Jan 19, 1795 . . . died in Rochester, April 18, 1868.” But the next phrase, a whole epitaph in itself, hints that this man wasn’t simply a footnote: “A Tribune of the People,” it says. And then unrolls the scroll of a life that never stopped at just *one* awakening.

“In 1826,” it begins, “being convinced that the use of spiritous liquors was an evil, he emptied the contents of the bar of his tavern into the canal near this site.” On many a headstone, that itself would be enough to mark a notable (or eccentric) life accomplishment! No surprise, then, the next line records that he was instrumental in establishing a Temperance Society in every town in the county. But Bloss was only 31 the year conviction-- or baptism-- took hold of him and he poured his investments into the Erie Canal. With forty-two years still stretching in front of him, it turned out to be only his warm-up act-- the *beginning* of a transformation of mind.

The marker continues, turning page after page of a faith lived out in flesh and blood: William Bloss next became the promoter of the Free School Law, which called for an end to legalized segregation in public education. Then he published “The Rights of Man,” one of the first Anti-Slavery papers.

Our Jewish kin have a Passover song called the “Dayenu.” It means, literally, “it would have been enough.” If the Holy One had only created us from dust, it would have been enough; if he had only made us a people, it would have been enough. If he had only led us out of bondage-- Dayenu. “*Da, dayenu, da, dayenu, da, dayenu, dayenu, dayenu!*”

Standing in front of William Clough Bloss’ grave marker, I think of that song. In 1838, a full sixteen years before Susan B. Anthony began campaigning for women’s rights, he advocated the ballot for us. It would have been enough!

But then comes a stunning line that bears quoting directly: “In 1845, while a representative at Albany, in rebuke of the caste prejudice of the day, he left his seat among the whites at a communion service and seating himself with the separatist blacks, partook of the sacrament with them.” *Dayenu!*

We’re only halfway down the plaque now, but I’ll cut to the highlights: In 1856, when the Massachusetts Colonists were en route west to Kansas, and each member was issued a rifle as a going-away, Bloss himself supplemented that presentation to each one with the gift of a Bible and a spelling book “to establish civil and religious liberty in Kansas.” *Dayenu!* It would have been enough; but it’s not all.

In response to a plea from a convicted murderer to oppose the death penalty, Bloss organized a rally that was attended by both Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony. “. . . For years he was a self-appointed chaplain of the county jail, and his ministry to the needy, the destitute, and the helpless continued throughout his life.” *Dayenu, dayenu!* Are you seeing William Bloss’ discernment in process? Following Jesus, you might say his life had turned from the holiness code, which demands separation from the impure, to the mercy code— which promotes association with the “other.”¹

Finally, the remarkable record of one man’s years ends with a simple tribute: “A thinker in advance of his age, an orator on whose lips the people hung, he boldly championed unpopular truths, consecrating his gifts to God and humanity.”

. . . be doers of the word, and not hearers only... This is “a word that must be acted upon, and not merely listened to.”²

A hundred and fifty years ago, William Clough Bloss acted on it. He was *for* those whom his own culture pushed aside. The ingredients seem strikingly contemporary: on the one hand, the disenfranchised, the racially excluded, the uneducated, the imprisoned, the destitute, the helpless, the poor. On the other hand, God’s got *us*: here *we* are. Sometimes presbyopic, and as James says, very fond of mirrors...

The thing about mirrors is that you can’t see ahead of you: only your own face, and whatever is behind. In that way, it’s a one-dimensional experience. I know that from the time I nearly plowed into a parked construction flat-bed at 60 miles per hour, while peering into the rear-view mirror to adjust my lipstick! It was a true experience of presbyopia-- not being able to see things right in front of my eyes.

¹It is Marcus Borg, among others, who notes this direction of focus in Jesus’ life.

²Sophie Laws, *The Epistle of James*. Harper’s New Testament Commentaries. (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), 79.

The words James chooses imply that those who look at their own faces in a mirror are actually taking a long, lingering gaze— but immediately forget. But then James uses a different verb to say that just a *glance* -- catching a glimpse into the law of liberty, well— it *is* enough! Enough to send your life on a whole different course, and dump your assets into the nearest canal, and give you the gift of ambiguous vision.

Christian Educator Doug Adams once pointed out that the original root for our word “ambiguity” described a military predicament of being attacked from two sides simultaneously. “Ambiguity required a military leader to give attention to two different directions at once rather than focusing all of his attention in just one place. . .”¹ The opposite of ambiguity, he said, is not clarity but idolatry, “which mistakes our part for the whole and excludes from our attention other equally important parts.”

Perhaps that’s why in the grand scheme of things, our two eyes function the way they do. Each eye by itself sees a slightly different image; but together, the two sight-lines bring a single image into focus. If we look one-eyed, we have only a flat, one-dimensional view; but to see the world bi-nocularly – that is, ambiguously, from two directions-- is to see it whole.² Binocular vision! The binocular view happens with one eye on the “already” and one eye open to the “not yet.”

William Bloss didn’t just say “I believe.” His verbs were all active ones. He reversed direction. He changed his mind. He walked out. He walked in. He took initiative. He said no. He said *yes*. His epitaph, that irresistibly draws two neighbors to his grave again and again, more than 200 years after his birth, is all action... **But God says ~ trade your mirrors for binoculars! Be doers of the word, and not hearers only...**

And so we have come full circle in these four days, from the bear to the busker to the bartender and back to our non-conforming, problematic Savior; to discover that no matter how much we might wish it otherwise, Christ’s own simply cannot separate our spiritual experience from radical social and ethical consequences-- “practical acts of faith, in the world.”³ “*Da, dayenu, da dayenu...*” May the Spirit’s clarion voice keep singing that tune in your heart! Amen.

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¹ From Leo Steinberg’s interpretation of Leonardo’s “Last Supper,” quoted by Doug Adams in “Ambiguity: A Gift of the Arts for Inclusive Communities.” Pacific School of Religion Faculty and Staff Articles, [Http://www.psr.edu/page.cfm](http://www.psr.edu/page.cfm) (Accessed 05/07/02).

²With gratitude to my conversation partner Mary Lee Miller, who first mused on this idea with me.

³A phrase used earlier by Rodger Nishioka.