

Making and Breaking: Art, Hospitality, and Eucharist

Bruce Herman

Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, Boston College

February 17, 2016

Good evening.

It's an honor and a pleasure to be invited to speak at the Boisi Center. Thanks to Suzanne Hevelone for extending the welcome. In a way, the very fact of her is a partial source of topic for my talk. Inviting artists to speak publicly is always a bit of a risk

says in the first of his

in the birthing of a work of art. And the connection to hospitality can be clarified by looking at a practice that dates from ancient Greece. (SLIDE: tessera hospitalis)

principle is so obvious, so simple that it is very difficult to think about, much less articulate. And its connection to art and literature is a tangled and messy one. Its connection to religion is even messier—and even more interesting to me as an artist and provocateur. Yes. Artists are troublemakers. But I did warn you.

For clarity's sake let's rehearse this whole thing once more. Intellectual courtesy, , is a requirement for receptivity to a text or work of art. And Lewis is even more forceful in his requirement of submission to the text. You need to let down your guard to the stranger – in this case the text of work of art. You must risk being infected. Changed. There is no other way to receive the meanings of the text. If you refuse to submit and give in to the narrative, to allow yourself to swept along in the story, you will only get the most superficial aspects of that story or any work of art. You must entrust yourself to the artist or storyteller and be overcome by the image or music or poem or story or film. The symbol—that wonderful image of shared trust and meaning—originated, as I said, with a ritual breaking, a in order to welcome the stranger into one's place of intimate being and dwelling. A truly astonishing example of this is the story of Abraham's mysterious three visitors at the Oaks of Mamre recounted in Genesis 18. This is the story that the writer of Hebrews is referring to in the admonition to offer hospitality to strangers who might end up being angels. (SLIDE: Rublev's)

The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

Mysterious isn't it? "The Lord appeared to Abraham." And we are told that it is "three men standing nearby". Abraham and his wife Sarah rush to bake fine cakes and their servant slaughters and prepares a fatted calf to make sacrifice and provide food for the strangers. The Lord—mysteriously present in the three visitors—declares that He will return again at the same time next year and Sarah, barren for a lifetime, will conceive a son in her old age. She laughs at the prospect of pleasure with her hundred-year-old husband and at the proposed miracle of fecundity where there was barrenness. And the child born was to be named Isaac – son of laughter. This miraculous son is promised as the one through whom all

the nations of the world will be blessed—and he is same son that Abraham is called to sacrifice on the mount in the land of Moriah. “Take your son, your only son, the son whom you love—to a place in the land of Moriah that I will show you, and sacrifice him to me there.”

This extraordinary tale is loaded with all of the central motifs I’m laboring to clarify: costly hospitality, the risky welcome of the stranger, sacrifice and overcoming of the propensity for scapegoating, the Eucatastrophe of the Sacrifice of Isaac as foreshadowing of the Christ and his cross, etc. We know how the story ends. But Abraham was not so lucky. He was in the thick of the story as it unfolded—terrorized by the possibility of being required by God to give up the very person most prized—a son of promise through whom the entire human race was to be blessed. But note that Scripture interprets Scripture, and again the writer of Hebrews says,

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.”¹⁶ Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

So Abraham was spared having to do the terrible thing of giving up his most precious son of promise—and as you know, a ram was caught in a thicket nearby and was sacrificed in place of Isaac.

Those of us who follow Jesus believe that he is the one that was prefigured in Isaac—yet unlike our father Abraham, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ was not spared the ordeal, but indeed offered up his son, his only son, the son whom he loved. At the heart of the Gospel is this sacrifice, this breaking and loss. A costly hospitality. And in this case, the welcome is over the threshold of Being itself into the house and the table of God. God is also the holy food we partake. “Take eat, this is my body. Do this in remembrance of me. Drink ye all of this, for this is my blood of the new covenant.” And that covenant is the ultimate form of hospitality—where the costly thing broken is the host himself. What we call the “host” in the Eucharist is God himself, and God is our host at this holy banquet of His suffering.

The Eucharist is the ultimate Eucatastrophe. And it is the perfect broken symbol of welcome—

terrible surprise occurred: God dies in their place. God takes the punishment for the broken promises and Himself is broken.

But again, what bearing does all this have on the making of a work of art? Rather than attempting a verbal explanation, I will do what artists do— you by playing a brief film clip of a work in progress that I am currently trying to bring to closure in the studio.

A brief description of the genesis of the project first: three years ago I was invited by Richard Hays, Dean of Duke University Divinity School to have an exhibition – a collaboration with my friends, painter Makoto Fujimura and composer Christopher Theofanidis, of our paintings and a musical score based upon T. S. Eliot's (A project, incidentally begun in conversation over a great meal hosted in New York by a generous patron!) Also at a dinner, the night of our performance and reception at Duke, Dean Hays sat next to me as we dined at his table. He leaned over and said, "Bruce—I've been following your work and we love having your QUARTETS paintings here in Duke Chapel. But having looked over much of your work I don't think you've ever painted the Resurrection. You have addressed

