**A Homily in Celebration of the Life of Tom Greene**

**Church of the Redeemer, Bethesda, Maryland April 29, 2023 David Schlafer**

**Deuteronomy 15:7-8, 10-11 Hebrews 13:1-3 2 Timothy 1:16-18**

1. **Eight languages—EIGHT.**

**It’s all some of us can do to opperate effectively in one.**

**But eight is the number in which Tom Greene has been fluent.**

**The art of language translation depends on far more—does it not—**

**than cross-matching vocabularies, and achieving semantic equivalence in sentence content.**

**Gaining language skill involves endless drilling, mimicking, memorizing.**

**But even all this isn’t nearly enough.**

**The most important element in learning how to SPEAK another language**

**is learning how to listen with care to WHAT is said and HOW it’s said**

**by those whose thoughts and feelings are framed in the language you seek to learn.**

**Facility in a language requires working your way, with patience and curiosity,**

**toward finding a home in a different world.**

**It requires inviting into your own world one that is initially, inevitably strange;**

**then slowly, systematically earning your welcome into that new world.**

**Language proficiency requires a deep respect for, even a degree of deference to the other—**

**meeting the other on the other’s terms, extending your terms to accommodate theirs.**

**You have to learn your way into a new mode of meaning and being.**

**Tom has undertaken that all-consuming adventure again and again and again.**

1. **Tom’s language skills have been invaluable, obviously,**

**in his chosen vocation as a US Foreign Service Officer.**

**Here, all the requirements and challenges, the benefits and rewards of language learning**

**have been essential and critical—not only for the job itself,**

**but for the safety and well-being of communities, nations, and peoples.**

**Subtlety, nuance of language, fine-tuned expressions of intention—**

**these are *sine qua non* for success in a diplomatic mission.**

**But it’s important here to pause over the adjective “diplomatic”.**

**The connotations clustering around that word often go in one of two directions:**

* **“Diplomatic” as simply “making nice,” being pleasantly polite, making no waves—**

**regardless of whether or not you are sincere ; or**

* **“Diplomatic” as “negotiating your best deal in contention with,**

**even at the expense of whoever sits on the opposite side of the table”**

**Diplomatic language is often employed for the purpose, one way and another**

**of making just enough connection to be successful in competition.**

**And thus this tension:**

**Language is best learned by putting DOWN**

**the predisposing boundaries and defenses of one’s native tongue**

**In diplomacy, that language is employed in contexts where, to be successful,**

**one has to constantly keep one’s guard UP.**

**Tom might have climbed the professional diplomat ladder faster and higher,**

**had he been more disposed to hold those whose languages he’d learned**

**at an objective, guarded distance—taking advantage of them as necessary.**

**But that’s just not Tom Greene, is it?**

**Language and diplomacy, for Tom have been ways to MEET and COMMUNE at table,**

**rather than to PARRY and THRUST from opposite sides of the table.**

**For Tom, language and diplomacy have been embodied expressions of hospitality.**

1. **Which accounts for the reading from Scripture**

**that his family has chosen for our hearing on this day as we celebrate a life well lived.**

**Each and all, these readings can be summarized by a single admonition—**

**one easy to affirm in the abstract, but challenging to enact on the ground—**

**namely: *Put yourself in the place of the other, and engage with the other accordingly.***

**And most particularly: *Whatever social, economic, political discrepancies may obtain;***

***if you are in the position of power, the position of privilege—reach not DOWN but ACROSS.***

**This might be described simply as enacting the principle of love—**

**love not as spontaneous sentimentality, but love as intentional strategy.**

1. **Strategic love, hospitable care, language as a bridge to meeting—**

**these have been, in Tom Greene, signature characteristics—habits of his heart.**

**To count the ways, we’d be here all day, but a couple of instances will illustrate.**

* **Growing up in a culture where males had pride of place,**

**Tom has been, with family, friends, and professional colleagues,**

**a man who engaged women with respect and compassion as in every-way colleagues**

**In so doing, Tom has, over and again, served as a role model for those around him.**

* **When recently asked what he regarded as his greatest achievements,**

**Tom immediately cited this—providing the financial support necessary**

**to fund the pilgrimage of a Muslim co-worker to the holy site of the Hadj.**

1. **But there is, I dare say, this hanging question in your minds:**

**What’s with that character in the Reading from 2 Timothy—**

**the one with the LONG name beginning with “O”?**

**I’m just guessing none of us has ever heard THAT Scripture read at a memorial service before!**

**St. Paul’s friend and collegue, Onesiphorus, was a Biblical character to whom Tom took a shine.**

**Tom had a great grandfather who actually bore that name.**

**A man who signed a petition testifying to the good character of a woman who**

**was accused of being a witch in Salem, Massachusetts.**

**Tom’s great grandfather was a namesake of St. Paul’s colleague in more than name only.**

**As Paul describes the original Onesiphorus,**

**Tom himself has identified with, and advocated for all sorts of others—**

**whatever burdens they might have been bearing.**

**Prior to the births of two of his grandchildren, Tom suggested each time that the child**

**be given the name of Onesiphorus as a badge of identity and honor.**

**For some reason, in each case, the children’s parents politely declined the suggestion.**

**(Imagine the nicknames the kids would have acquired in first grade.)**

**But there was, I think, something of wisdom in Tom’s suggestion, nonetheless.**

**Radical hospitality, vulnerable diplomacy, deep language translation/connection—**

**these qualities don’t just pop up at random, they have to be nurtured, cultivated, inculcated—**

**they have to be passed on in families as a moral and spiritual heritage and legacy.**

**The Onesiphorus name didn’t get passed along; but what that name stands for did.**

**During the extended period of his final illness,**

**the hospitality Tom so freely shared with others came back to him full circle**

**as his family tenderly cared for him as he has cared for so many.**

1. **On this day, we give great thanks for Tom Greene’s legacy.**

**Thank you, Gracious God, for the rich hospitality of your love**

**that has come to us through your servant Tom.**

**Grant that, with others whom we encounter—**

**especially those whose worlds may be strange to us—**

**grant us, the willingness, the imagination, the persistence**

**to freely share what, from Tom, we have so abundantly received.**