

## **Plastered and Stoned: Power and Powerlessness in Renaissance Siena and Here, Now**

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I need to frame this sermon with a little background -- otherwise I might feel a little self-conscious. A few years ago a young man spent the summer with us. He was the son of a dear friend of Mark's -- Beni, whom Mark has known since high school when Beni came to Marietta Ohio and spent a year with Mark's family as an exchange student from Switzerland. Anyway, Beni's son, Fadri, came to Palatine and spent the summer with us while working in Chicago. Beni wanted to say thank you and so, this January, he took us to Tuscany for a week. It was a lavish thank you.

I'd wanted to go to Florence, Italy since I'd taken Art history in middle school. The History Of Art by Janson, which I have dragged around with me since then, is a kind of sacred text for me because the history of art is the history of history. Beyond my wildest dreams, I got to see the Birth of Venus and the Prima Vera by Botticelli, the statue of David by Michelangelo, frescoes and crosses by Giotto, porcelain by Andrea Della Robbia, icons by Ghirlandaio glowing with gold, the graves of Galileo, Michelangelo. For me these are bigger than Hollywood stars by a lot. Our last full day in Italy, we took the train to Siena -- a perfectly preserved medieval city atop a great hill. In the center of town, in the Palazzo Pubblico (the ancient City Hall) up a flight of stairs, through a series of amazing chambers -- I found a room that took my breath away. A small placard for the linguistically impaired explained in English that this room -- the Sala dei Nove -- or the chamber of the nine -- was the place where the governing council sat to vote on matters of concern to the citizens of Siena. The three huge frescoes that covered the walls just above the doorways were called The Effects of Good and Bad Government.

I hadn't expected that. Back in Florence, the ancient house of government, the Palazzo Vecchio was a massive stone block edifice -- looking much like a fortress with a tall... bell tower rising above and dominating the structure. The whole building was a statement of might that awed me each time I walked past it. And the serious lions along with the giant male figures announced in no uncertain terms that power lived here. At one point I said to Mark, my husband, "every time we come here I feel sort of small and overwhelmed." And Mark, with characteristic clarity, said, "that's how it's supposed to make you feel." Totally effective! -- hundreds of years later we still understand the language of power and powerlessness.

In Siena, the governing house looks pretty sturdy too and rising above it is Siena's bell tower -- deliberately and audaciously taller than Florence's -- or, for that matter, any other municipal tower in Italy. Florence and Siena were long bitter rivals and, in a defiant gesture Siena had architecturally asserted its greatness, saying, "our tower's taller than yours." They made it so tall, in fact, that it is seriously unstable. Engineers haven't yet figured out how to reinforce it without ruining its tall beauty and the skyline of Siena. So the bell is very seldom rung so as not to disturb Siena's tall but delicate erection.

I was ready for more arrogance inside the building. And I wasn't disappointed -- there were murals, paintings, and frescoes, and sculptures depicting bloody battles. But the Sala Dei Nove was a room of a different color.

It is a room wrapped in a political and philosophical dialogue in paint and plaster. I spent along time in that room looking at the images that Ambrogio Lorenzetti had set

into the plaster nearly 700 years ago. It set me on a train of thought that I want to share with you but to do that – I'd like to be your docent, your tour guide for a bit.

When the room was first entered – before the door was moved some time ago -- the first thing a person would see were the images of the Effects of Bad Government. The journey across that fresco begins in what is called the Countryside of Fear. You see Timor – fear – a winged figure with a face like a mummified corpse, with teeth bared and eyes fierce. Fear wields deadly sword and holds out a banner that reads: "Because each seeks only his own good, in this city Justice is subjected to Tyranny; wherefore, along this road nobody passes without fearing for his life, since there are robberies outside and inside the city gates." "Because each seeks only his own good." Before fear is a countryside of desolation. You can see murders, robberies, ruins and fires burning, soldiers running amok – a bleak scene.

Next you see the city where men tear away at buildings, there are abductions, more murders, piles of rubble. Because of its location this fresco has quite a bit of damage, leaving large blank spaces that, all things considered, is a little bit of a relief – though perhaps a contemporary imagination can paint in more horrendous images than the early Renaissance mind could imagine – on the other hand – the ancients were also masterminds of torture. In any case, the explanation of all this destruction and fear is found a little further on in the Court of Tyranny.

Tyranny is a pale-faced, robed, and horned figure holding both a chalice and a bludgeon and around him ranges his foul court –labeled just in case the symbolism might escape the viewer. Fraud, Treason, Cruelty, Furor, Division, War, Greed, Pride, and Vainglory (as though Pride wasn't enough) are gathered around and above him while below the figure of justice is slumped, with her scales broken, her arms bound, and her crown gone. One of the most chilling images is of Division, who is sawing herself in two, reminding me chillingly of our own times. And below the picture runs a border which reads in part: "There, where Justice is bound, no one is ever in accord for the Common Good nor pulls the cord straight; therefore, it is fitting that Tyranny prevails... always protects the assailant, the robber, and those who hate peace, so that every land lies waste."

Turning the corner to the West Wall – where, had it not been overcast and rainy when we were there, the sun would have streamed in – is in almost equal and opposite contrast, the court of Good Government. Here is radiant beauty and color. Below the fresco it reads in part: "[Justice], where she rules, induces to unity the many souls [of citizens], and they, gathered together for such a purpose, make the Common Good their Lord; and he ...to govern his state, chooses never to turn his eyes from the resplendent faces of the Virtues who sit around him. Therefore to him in triumph are offered taxes... therefore, without war, every civic result duly follows –useful, necessary, and pleasurable."

Now you see Justice on a throne, unbound. I wish this were a perfect ideal of justice – here she's got her scales back, but there are two winged figures dispensing punishment or reward. Myself, I reject the idea of being good for reward or punishment and prefer the idea of being good for -- nothing. Still, more importantly, above her head floats Wisdom and below her feet is Concord winding together a cord of harmony that is then passing among the people.

In fact, at this time in Siena, the rising merchant class had coined for themselves the name *il popolo* – the people. The people hold the cord of harmony until it emerges again and is wound around the wrist of a figure who looks very like a king. The thing is, that in Siena, at this time, there was no ruling king or prince, no distant rulers really interfered in their affairs – it seems as though the Sieneese houses were too busy

quarreling with each other. The cord of Harmony circles the wrist of the Lord of the Common Good. He is surrounded by carefully labeled virtues: Peace, Fortitude, Prudence, Magnanimity, Temperance, and Justice – a recurring theme. Or peace, resilience, wise choices or practicality, generosity, balance or moderation, fairness.

Then you turn the corner again you see the Effects of Good Government in the great panorama of the Secure City and the Secure Countryside. There are many details that I'd gladly dwell on -- but what this city and the countryside both show are details of ordinary life – workshops, marketplaces, there is construction and repair, children playing, women dancing, students in a classroom – this was a period when 50% of the population of Siena was literate – though I am not sure if this included women.

Then in the secure countryside where an angel holds a banner that reads “Without fear all may travel freely and each may till and sow, so long as this commune shall maintain this lady [Justice] sovereign, for she has stripped the wicked of all power.” Here are shepherds, tradesmen, and crops grow and are harvested at the same time– a miracle possible because this was a piece of art in the very early Renaissance when realism had not yet reached its peak and symbolism lacking subtlety was still king.

I stood in that room and thought about the powerful messages in those frescoes. Siena was a mess of squabbling families. The long experiment of The Council of Nine was the creation of necessity. The 9 were from the general merchant class. They each only governed for 6 months at a time and during that time they lived in the palazzo in special quarters so that, at least in theory, they could not be pressured into their decisions. And though I know of no record of this – the fresco cycle seems to be a reminder that there is a better path than constant squabbles for power and wealth. So day after day the Nine made their decisions under the gaze of Peace and Generosity and Moderation and Justice and Wisdom and Concord. And even more – they made their decisions while seeing the effects of those decisions on the lives of real people – eating or starving, working or idle, harvesting or seeing barren land, harmony or violence.

This was the Renaissance in its earliest moments and the value of a human being was just beginning to count for something. Siena was no utopia. But I thought about the strange political scene back in the United States and I wondered how our politics would be different if our political leaders had before them the images of moral virtues that transcend religion or party and if they were free of lobbyists; even more – if they saw or had to face the real impact of their decisions on the lives of real people. I looked up the artwork of the United States Capitol building and found images that harkened back to ancient art – particularly the deep blue of the carpets – like the skies of Medieval and Early Renaissance art with golden stars or crests embedded.

The Renaissance was a time when the history of art, as usual, mirrored the history of the times – from purely religious subjects – real live people gradually began to inhabit artwork and as they did the rigid flatness of the human form -- you can see that flatness still in the figures of Lorenzetti – that flatness gave way and the human form became three dimensional even on the canvass. And then the purely religious gave way to the human and earthly and, yet, still sacred. But more than simply in artwork – the Renaissance art mirrored the times – and since then the human spirit has stepped into the picture and asked and then demanded to be seen as sacred, as worthy of care. Humanity has struggled too long, suffered too much to dismantle the ancient hierarchy of God, Man, Woman (if man decided she had a soul or not), (I'm not even going to mention Children), Animals (again waiting to find out if they had souls), and all of nature.

Humanity – without divine decree or the favor of the gods – wanted to have a voice, a place on the canvass of being and shaping.

The houses of the senate and the house of representatives may carry some of the imagery of ancient art – but – looking at the scenes in those chambers the politicians have become the object of their own worship and veneration. In an election year, it is critical to demand that our leaders and those who would be our leaders keep before them the images of the people whose lives they impact. It is critical to measure our leaders and those who would be our leaders against their ability to, understanding of, willingness to uphold the Common Good or reconnect our Concord.

The room in the Palazzo Pubblico spoke to me, not of the past, but of the timelessness of our yearning for justice and fairness, for peace and plenty, for freedom and fellowship. In generation after generation we have to be reminded, in some way – that our kin on this earth are not means to an end. When I think about the politics that gave birth to this nation -- and it was an imperfect and incomplete politics – it was based upon this idea that every human being is worthy of determining their own destiny and that somehow – these destinies are bound together – like the cords of Concord. And since then – just as humanity had to fight to dismantle that old hierarchy of value – we are still in that struggle – passing the Cord to more and more people – more and more life.

In an election year, as Unitarian Universalists, it is important that we remember that struggle because that struggle and those values are in our very essence. We are those who believe that revelation is not sealed – that new insight comes from the work of each generation. Yet we must also demand of our leaders and those who would be our leaders that there are some timeless principles worth keeping before us. Perhaps if we are faithful to these sacred ideas, we can see something step beyond the flat dimensions of reality TV – now a new god to many, perhaps we can help something vital, more expansive, more dimensional, more real emerge -- so that 700 years from now someone might be able to say the walls of their houses of government may have been plain – but the people were generous, fair, curious, great hearted, and signaled a new era on this earth.