Steve Jungkeit
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: John 3: 1-8; Acts 2: 1-13
January 23, 2022

All This Sainted Difference is What God Wants: The Spiritual Legacy of Robert Farris Thompson

"Keith's death is incomprehensible. I refuse to believe that the next time I ring the bell to his…studio…he won't be there."[1]

So begins a tribute penned by Robert Farris Thompson to the late Keith Haring, whose untitled painting graces the cover of our bulletin today. "I refuse to believe he won't be there," Thompson states, words that I wish to quote in relation to Thompson's own death in late November. I knew the day would soon arrive, for he was exceedingly frail by the end, and he had already absented himself from many of the spaces he habitually occupied around Yale and New Haven. Still, I refuse to believe that the next time I walk into Atticus Café, or the Union League, both on Chapel Street in New Haven, I won't discover Robert Farris Thompson sitting there – holding court with a student, or silently composing his next book on the butcher paper laid out beneath the plates.

I'd like to tell you about this remarkable man this morning, in an attempt to convey the massive influence he has had upon me, as well as generations of teachers and historians and religious practitioners as well. More than that, though, I want to take you on a brief walking tour of his thinking by offering you several luminous quotations across his body of work, each accompanied by a dash of commentary. His words contain uncommon, precious, and timely wisdom that we do well to heed. But first, let me tell you a little about the man himself.

Thompson, or "Master T" as he liked to be called, was a professor of African Art History at Yale. He was a legend, a larger than life character who could deliver a lecture on Friday morning, and then by Friday night be conducting research in a Haitian shantytown outside of Port-au-Prince, or rehearsing tango steps in a milonga in Buenos Aires, all in the service of understanding and explicating the Black Atlantic world that he found so intoxicating. By Monday morning he'd be back in the classroom, sharing what he'd discovered. His lectures were artistic performances in and of themselves. He used the lectern as a drum, weaving in images and musical interludes and language lessons and impromptu dance moves. Essentially, his teaching was divided into three layers – first, exploring the tribal cultures up and down the coast of West Africa; second, exploring how those cultures were reblended and reborn as a result of the Middle Passage; and third, showing how all those traditions showed up in contemporary culture, whether pop music or visual art, dance moves or grafitti, sports or language. His charisma, his incandescent prose, and his massive erudition garnered attention – and not only from students. The painter Jean-Michel Basquiat was a fan. David Byrne of Talking Heads became a frequent guest at Yale because of Thompson's presence. Even Beyonce flashed an image of herself reading his first book, *Black Gods and Kings*, in her recent film *Black is King.*

Over the last several years he became, improbably enough, a friend. Someone had recommended his books to me during a visit to Havana. I was stunned, because I had seen Thompson around Yale when I was a grad student there. From afar, he seemed another eminent

[1] Robert Farris Thompson, "Requiem for the Degas of the B-Boys, Keith Haring," printed in Artforum International, May 1990.

and stodgy member of that learned institution, in his penny loafers and blue blazer and J.Press shirt. But here was a man in Havana, of all places, telling me that if I wanted to know what was going on in the religious life of Cuba, Thompson was the guy to read. And so I did. I read all of his books that I could lay my hands upon.

Doing so was my Copernican Revolution. Prior to reading him, my thought world had been largely Euro-centric in focus. Not entirely, but largely. I studied German theology and philosophy, along with French literary theory and the American reception of those thought forms. The language of systematic theology had been drilled into me, and I found it useful, and sometimes even revelatory. But by the time I was finished writing my dissertation, I was more or less through with that world. Whatever life, whatever Spirit, was being explicated by those systems seemed to have fled under the pressure of all that careful and plodding analysis. I wasn't through with God, or with questions of spirituality by a long shot, but the language in which it had all been couched felt dry, dessicated, like the dry bones of Daniel's vision.

The best way I can describe the experience of reading RFT's work is that it was like Dorothy exiting her black and white world and entering the technicolor land of Oz. The world seemed sharper, brighter, more marvelous than it did before. It also seemed larger, and a whole lot richer than it had been previously. It was theology that he was doing, but one that was far more expansive than anything I had encountered before. For me, his work prompted a shift toward a far more comprehensive understanding of the category we in the churches call "Spirit." The New Testament provides us with a robust understanding of Spirit, which in content and in form looks an awful lot like the rituals Thompson describes so well throughout his books. (I won't delve into the theology behind that shift, but if you're interested in reading more, I'll include a long footnote in the printed version of this sermon.)[2]

---

[2] The connective thread that binds all these worlds together is an experience of the Spirit, which RFT spent his career invoking, chasing, and inhabiting. Coming at this from our own tradition, I'd put it this way. Christian theologians have often used aspects of the Trinity to orient themselves, and I would dare say ordinary people of faith do so as well. Those of us in the Protestant Mainline tend to be oriented toward the first person of the Trinity – toward the transcendent God. For those of us with that orientation, our faith tends to be expressed in our thoughts, words and deeds. God is approached by thinking, and God is incarnated in our ethical activities. Many evangelicals but also some Catholics orient themselves around devotion to the second person of the Trinity, Jesus. In such an orientation, faith is expressed through works of piety and personal devotion, inviting Jesus into the intimate corners of human existence. But for others – the mystics, the artists, and the poets, and yes, the pluralists, the figure of the Spirit is what orients them in the world. For them, the divine comes alive in experience, and especially ecstatic experiences found in rituals, in art or in performance. That latter orientation is rooted in the account of the first Christians as recorded by the book of Acts. None of those aspects of the Trinity are meant to be exclusive of one another, but they do tend to indicate where the accent will fall in one's thinking and being.

RFT has helped to move me from placing the accent upon God to placing the accent upon Spirit. Indeed, that seems to be in keeping with what Jesus himself was doing in the Gospels, and to what the earliest Christians experienced – or so the book of Acts indicates. The category of Spirit opens toward diverse expressions of the divine in varied times and spaces – Spirit unifies. It allows for flexibility regarding the particulars of creed or doctrine, including the possibility that one might forgo creeds altogether – Spirit overcomes such distinctions. It moves to get us out of our heads, for Spirit connects us to the rhythms and movements of our own bodies, helping us to feel marvelously alive – Spirit is ecstatic. And it expresses a concern for social well-being and reconciliation, for it is Spirit itself that gives us the courage to withstand assaults upon the dignity and personhood of all human beings – for Spirit is justice. Spirit is the connective tissue within our humanity that allows us to say: all this sainted difference is what God wants. That's not a new revelation in our community, but there are dimensions of Spirit that we haven't yet encountered or explored. My hope is that we will have opportunities to do just that in the days, months, and years to come.

A little later, I sought him out at Atticus in downtown New Haven, having learned that he took his lunches there. I introduced myself, and then took him to The Union League the following week. He was enormously generous with his time and his insights, then and after. One of my proudest moments was when he visited us here in Old Lyme, to hear the South African choir perform. He had Parkinson's, which was at that point pretty advanced. He needed a lot of help, but he was still on fire intellectually. He noted every movement the choir made in its choreography. He murmured and nodded appreciatively throughout the concert. Later, he amazed one of our members by speaking to her in Ki-Kongo, her native tongue. "How is this white man speaking to me in my language?" she marveled. And he shared wild tales about immersing himself in the rituals and traditions of Africa and its diaspora, learning to trust the spiritual vision contained there. He's helped me to do the same, trusting that in marginalized and misunderstood black spiritual traditions like Vodou in Haiti, Santeria and Palo and Abakua in Cuba, and Candomble in Brazil, there is a deep and wise vision of the world that I too needed to heed. It was the suspicion that I couldn't understand myself, or my own culture as a North American, without understanding the things he was describing.

I've promised a tour of his work, and so what I'd like to do now is to offer three quotations that exemplify the world he wished to show us. They also, by the by, offer a glimpse of his exquisite prose – he used images and phrases the way Kandinsky used color or Ravel used rhythm and tone. He's that good.

Here is the first stop along our tour. It comes at the end of an interview contained in his book *Aesthetic of the Cool*. It was conducted in 1992 with Donald Cosentino, an anthropologist at UCLA. Summing up some of his personal and scholarly instincts, RFT says this:

> "Here's another liberating thing I live by – from James Joyce. Someone once said in the middle of his speech, "Mr. Joyce, with all due respect, you are a son of a bitch." And Joyce said, "That too." Now I live by that in this sense, the "that too" syndrome. "Oh, so you are a drummer?" That too. "So you are a performer?" That too. Or, you teach art history? That too. Confidently, we add on roles the way that many African performers do. The way (a vodou priest) can place a gift given to her by (a student) on her altar. Take our cues from vernacular happenings."[3]

What if each of our lives is something like an altar? Not an altar on which you sacrifice things, but an altar on which the plenitude of each of our lives is displayed. If you've ever seen images of an African derived altar in Cuba, say, or Haiti, you'll know that they're frequently very crowded with all sorts of objects signifying all sorts of things – bottles, candles, bowls of fruit, dolls, pictures, feathers, glasses, cups, money, food, flowers – everything. It's a vision in which everything has its place, and there's nothing that doesn't belong. Moreover, there's always room for something else.

That's a marvelous vision of what a human life can be. But it's also a marvelous vision of what a religion can be. It's a vision of life that is additive, rather than subtractive, where it is possible to incorporate and be multiple things without having to cancel out other important facets of being. Too often, if we are honest, the Christian faith has functioned as a subtractive and reductive force in the world. It was not meant to be so, but over the years, for example, it has come to mean that you couldn't maintain another spiritual practice alongside Christianity. It meant you couldn't love someone of the same sex, or someone you didn't intend to live with in

---

[3] Robert Farris Thompson, *Aesthetic of the Cool* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2011), pg. 70.

holy matrimony. It worked to contain and control the experience of beauty and the movement of bodies, and it accomplished this by encouraging adherents to slash at whatever would interrupt their piety. It's not an accident, after all, that when we're asked to pray, we close our eyes, in order to remove that which would distract us.

Frequently, we do the same things to our own lives. We let ourselves become reduced to our occupations, or to some other identifying feature of who we are. We slash at our plenitude. The African altars, and RFT's own practice, is an invitation to live otherwise, and to make of ourselves an altar where everything belongs. But it's also an invitation to reclaim a spirituality and a vision of Christian faith, that is multiple, plural, and expansive. It is an invitation to say of your life, "yes, that too" - for you are many things! That's the first stop: the liberating vision of freedom that RFT displayed.

Let's move now to the second stop on our tour. These are the words that conclude RFT's book *Face of the Gods*, which is a survey of altars across the Black Atlantic world. The book ends thus:

> "The beauty and the moral splendor of the altars we have seen here, from Africa to the Americas…reveal Afro-Atlantic faiths as world religions, never again to be considered "cults," never again to be excluded from the calculus of world religious history. All this sainted difference is what God wants: as Thomas More noted in Utopia, 'God made different people believe in different things, because He wanted to be worshiped in many different ways.'"[4]

"All this sainted difference is what God wants." That's as good a summation as any I know for an understanding and practice of religious pluralism today. Even so, for the past four hundred years, the world has behaved otherwise. The peoples, cultures, and practices that RFT explored are the same people that our tradition, Christianity, worked overtime to expel, enslave, annihilate, suppress or ignore. (As an aside, let me note my astonishment that in ten years of study in Yale's Divinity School and Religious Studies Department, I never once heard anyone mention Thompson's presence across campus, or his work. No doubt that has to do with my own intellectual antennae at the time, but it also offers a window into the ways Christian theology has been utterly unprepared to countenance the religious visions RFT describes.) The violence visited upon those religious systems has been immense.

Instead of fastening upon the horrors of that annihilation, however, RFT chose to show us the glory, the splendor, and the morality of what too many of us, including me, had been taught to fear. Music, textiles, paintings, dances, rituals – it was all conveying a form of life that had deep integrity and spiritual vision. Not only that, he showed how traditions arriving on these shores from Kongo or Yoruba, from Akan or from Mande civilizations, traditions that many of us thought were marginal to our experience, were actually baked into the culture we take for granted. How many of us know, for example, that basic utterances like "uh huh" or "nuh-uh" are derived from Kongo? Even for those of us who are white, as RFT himself was, he taught us to understand just how African we already are, and how African we have been for a long time now.

Something within us and about us, or many of us at any rate, has wished to suppress that knowledge, but RFT spent his career excavating that buried truth, helping us to revel in, rather than shrinking from, that discovery. Perhaps we can put it like this: RFT's work exemplifies what the theorist Fred Moten called "fugitive enlightenments," and what another writer called

---

[4] Robert Farris Thompson, *Face of the Gods* (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1993), pg. 306.

"underground realms of being." In a time when white supremacy is ascendent, and in which the planet itself is in peril, it's high time we learned more about, and experienced for ourselves, some of the traditions that RFT explored so passionately. This is wisdom we need just now. All this sainted difference is what God wants.

Here, finally, is the third and final stop on our tour. This comes from RFT's last published piece during his lifetime, an article on mambo called "Ridding the Passing Moments of Their Fat." In it, he recalls a figure that often circulated through his writing and speech, a man walking down the streets of Mexico City wearing a shirt decorated with newspaper headlines about the Korean War and the potential of nuclear fallout. That image became the subject of a mambo song, written by Justi Barreto and orchestrated by Perez Prado, a song entitled "La camisa de papel," or, "The Shirt Made of Newspaper." For Thompson, it's an example of the ways African and African diasporic cultures have taught the world to inhabit the basic existential crises of life with courage and verve, even under the sign of disaster. Only this time, the disaster, we sense, is his own impending mortality.

> "Barreto's garment mixes terror with decorum, pain with pleasure. In saying he'll wear the shirt, the singer accepts life's blend of good and evil. He sidesteps doom with pleasure. In this regard he recalls Lucretius, who wrote that fear of death interrupts the flow of life, destroying value and meaning. It sets us up for demise….Lucretius asks us to consider Epicurus, who argued that if we free ourselves from anxiety about death, "then death is nothing to us." Thus liberated, we live out our days in relative peace and pleasure. Legitimate pleasures—a glass of wine, an evening with friends, a trip with a lover, the birth of a child—insulate us from fear of the inevitable."[5]

I'm moved when I recall that RFT wrote those words when his own body was failing, and when it was clear that his own death was hastily approaching. In writing as he did, he echoed the Apostle Paul, who taunted death by saying "O death, where is thy sting, O grave where is thy victory?" One way we achieve such victory, one way that we find such resurrection in life, is to do as African and African American artists and performers throughout the hemisphere have done for centuries: to take the horror of the times and to play it back, to transform it with creativity and self-possession, thereby achieving a reconciling grace that RFT suggested was the very meaning of "the cool." Sidestepping doom with pleasure, and finding ways to live within the cool, even under enormous existential pressure…is that not a call to us all as we move through our days? Is that not one of the greatest gifts that RFT channeled?

There are several more stops I wish I could show you on our tour. They'll have to wait for another day. I'll close by sharing that the last communication I had with RFT took place on Thanksgiving Day of 2020. We were all in lockdown mode, and so it was a quiet day in our house. I had spent the morning reading *Face of the Gods*, and a little later, in the spirit of giving thanks, I emailed him. I told him how profoundly grateful I was that such luminous prose existed in the world, and that it pointed to such beauty in the world. He responded, briefly, with his own thanks, suggesting that perhaps we could share a visit after Covid was beaten back. But it wasn't to be. That was the last time I ever heard from him.

Robert Farris Thompson's words have become, for me, another face of the divine. But it's more than his words that I value. His intervention altered hundreds of years of racist and

---

[5] Robert Farris Thompson, "Overture: Ridding the Passing Moments of Their Fat," printed in Gagosian Quarterly, Winter 2019.

white supremacist attitudes toward black art and religious expression. I thank God for his existence. He belongs to the immortals now. He is one of the ancestors, leading us all toward fugitive enlightenments of our own.

As they say in the Yoruba tradition, Ibae, Robert Farris Thompson.