

A Homily by the Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian
in celebration of
the life of John Gurdon Brewster
Trinity Episcopal Church in Fayetteville, New York
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Imagine a young boy always in search of great adventure. As it happens, in his back yard there is a clay pond. He learns to lay his body flat on the ground, digging through the layers of soil and muck, not with a shovel, but with his very own hands. It is not a tidy venture – his face becomes splashed with the mud, as his fully outstretched arms reach deep inside for the treasure – a mine of blue clay.

He takes handfuls, shaping it into objects, animals, and figures, his hands giving form to what began as a shapeless mass. And he sets his creations on a rock in the sun to bake into solid form.

Over time, of course, the clay would become dry and more fragile, until those wonderfully created objects would turn to dust. But then the rain would fall and those beloved figures again became part of the great clay pond – to be re-formed by the young boy's hands, making something new from something already once made.

But oh, while those figures lived, during their time on that rock in the sun, what stories were imagined for them by their creator! What adventures they lived, what passion they found, what sorrow, what joy, what error, what possibility...



John Gurdon Brewster – a marvelous possibility, formed in city and village, through farm and lake, his being expressed in so many shapes – learner and teacher, writer and poet, husband, father, son, and brother, chaplain and friend, priest and peacemaker...

...and, in all things, artist and sculptor.

In all things...because art was not something Gurdon *did*. Art was a lens – a way of seeing the world. Art was a vehicle – a way of showing the world. And art was a vessel – a way of offering himself to the world.

And in that art, in that man, in that gift, in all its marvelous variety of subject and medium, there is a constant theme. It is *movement*.

What is sculpted in clay, then cast in bronze, nonetheless *moves* – men and women dancing, bodies yearning and reaching, a Hebrew woman lifting her tambourine in a jubilant song, a civil rights minister passionately preaching to those with ears to hear, friends gently embracing, and children playing, always playing, even when the objects of war are scattered all around them.

And so, in Gurdon's community of sculptures, we see and hear those who Jesus calls us to see and hear in this world:

*...the hungry and the voiceless crying out,
the lonely seeking welcome,
the oppressed demanding justice,
the outcast and beaten enduring yet another night and day.* ⁱ

And if we dare, if we will bring ourselves not only to see but to honor the sacred in one another, then the hardened clay of our own minds and hearts is warmed and softened, and thus we ourselves are able to be re-formed and made new.

This was Gurdon's gift and it is his legacy. In his shaping of movement, *we* are moved, and, with that, we may just find ourselves yearning to dance in a circle of love with the whole of creation. And thus, the kingdom of Gods is at hand.



But lest we make the man into something of a statue himself, we do well to remember Gurdon as a real and very human being, with challenges and charms all his own: Riding his tractor, rescuing rocking chairs, making scones and jams, singing cowboy songs, and, even appearing as himself in a 1987 Marvel comic of *The Fantastic Four* ⁱⁱ, in which he prepares a superhero couple for marriage and speaks the words of Eucharistic Prayer C.


Perhaps in that same spirit of adventure, Gurdon would wear bright red socks to celebrate the Eucharist, his personal nod to the fire of the Holy Spirit. He believed that Holy Fire pours upon us and breathes within us, no matter what form or shape we take in this life – a small beloved parish, like Trumansburg, a vibrant college chaplaincy, like Cornell, a village barbershop, a local diner, a big city cathedral, within every type and manner of person, and in the imaginations of those called into ministry. Gurdon was so proud that during his time at Cornell, he sponsored thirty-five persons for ordination.

And we would do well to remember a man who knew deep and lasting love, the love of his four children and his grandchildren. He would smile that endearing smile and describe Ann, Mary, David, and Sarah, as *four sacred gifts, the most beautiful creations in the universe...bursting and beaming, glowing with sacred fire.* ⁱⁱⁱ

And, of course, there is Martha, whom he called Bess ("My Bess") – the woman with dazzling green eyes who crossed his path one autumn day at Union fifty-seven years ago. In his words, it was his Bess with whom he danced a life of blessing– at home and away, in India, at Ebenezer, in the church and on the farm, keeping the bees and plowing the fields, reading to one another, writing to one another. He said she was the one who held the center and kept the summer. And, when their winters came, they would wait together for spring, a spring which always came 'round again to find them and warm them.

Just so, in the last autumn of his life, Gurdon would write her to ask,

*What more is there now to do, Bess,
but to listen together to the heartbeat of the universe,
the silence of the leaves falling in the air...
...and to hear the birds burst into yet another spring.*^{iv}



The boy explorer who long ago laid his body flat on the ground to reach for the clay treasure of the earth, was himself laid in the ground last spring, during Holy Week. This time it was the outstretched arms of his wife and children and chaplain doing the digging, opening the ground to receive him as they sang the songs he loved. His was a green burial – Gurdon returns to the earth in the body he was given, making himself an offering of peace in his wish to do the earth no chemical harm.

And just as the clay figures he made as a boy would bake on that rock in the sun until they became dust, we are reminded that to dust *we* shall return. We shall become dust...

...but once again the rain will fall, and that rain is *living* water – it is the living water of God's promise that life is changed, yes, but not ended. And as that living water mixes with the very dust of us, we are clay once again, returned to *our* source, to our Creator, who will make something new from something already once made. *We* are made new. In our return to the earth, we return to God.

And how grateful we are that, even now, the body of John Gurdon Brewster is nourishing the very earth we stand on. How grateful we are that, even now, we may rest in the promise that he abides with the God who made him and loves him and makes all things unimaginably new. How grateful we are that, even now, John Gurdon Brewster is welcomed home, embraced by the Lord of the Dance in a movement of love that will never, ever end.

May it be so, our darling friend, may it be so...

...which is to say,

Amen.

ⁱ Gurdon Brewster. *Sculpture* (preface)

ⁱⁱ Marvel Comics (1987) *The Fantastic Four*: Vol. 1, No. 300

ⁱⁱⁱ Gurdon to Martha (letter on her 80th birthday)

^{iv} *ibid*