

April 23, 2020

Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) spent most of his life in the south of France being born and living in Aix-en-Provence with intervals in Paris. He was a complex and complicated man with deep convictions about art, painting in particular, that allowed him to express his deep feelings and wholistic experience of life.

I am not qualified to say much if anything about his art but I just want to share two aspects of his life that I think might apply to all of us and be a bit helpful in giving us a context for our life together in these days of sadness and fear.

When he was about the age of a sophomore in high school while attending a provincial all boys school, he came upon a group of bullies beating up a weaker boy, Emile Zola, and Paul intervened and rescued the boy from more harm.

As a gesture of appreciation, the next day, the young Emile brought Paul a small basket of apples from his father's orchard.

If you know anything about Cezanne's paintings (just Google Cezanne-images-apples and you will) apples pre-occupied him the rest of his life and became a part of art history for the ages. He took the simple apple and elevated it to the most sublime object of contemplation, seeing everything is an apple.

All of this because of a chance encounter between two adolescent boys, probably smelly and hormone driven, a chance encounter of affection, in an otherwise ordinary day and place and time.

The experience of unexpected, perhaps, unwarranted affection touches our souls at any age, and it can make a life-long difference.

The other thing about Cezanne is that he remained deeply present to his Catholic faith, rarely missing Sunday Mass especially in his later years, not to the mechanics and the clericalism, but the experience of the Church building.

He saw, I think, the Church building, in reality the cathedral in Aix that I once visited with Richard Rohr, as a repository of the full panoply of what goes into a truly human life; the joys and ecstasies, the grief and sadnesses, the doubts, pleasures, fears, and hopes of so many people, all kinds of people, that the building itself remembers and holds sacred forever and ever.

So as we sit unable to be together in our Church building experiencing a whole new way of being human in these unprecedented modern days, we need to be sustained by our affections, those words and deeds, gestures, touches, smiles, moments, that have deeply made home in our souls, many in my case having been in that Church building.

Cezanne never painted just a single apple, nor tree, nor building, he painted a whole experience and he used color to not so much realize what he saw but what he experienced in a wholeness that is what I think Jesus Christ saw when he looked down from that cross.

PS As is the case this side of death, nothing is perfect and all things are temporary pointing beyond themselves, in later life Cezanne was deeply offended when he thought Zola, now a writer of renown, was making fun of him in a character in one of his novels and never spoke to or saw him again.

When told of Zola's death, though, Cezanne sobbed uncontrollable for hours in his studio that still remains in Aix.