

“Being Known”

Sermon for January 15th, 2012 by The Rev. Joe Summers.

(Readings: I Samuel 3:1-10, Psalm 139:1-5,12-17, John 1:43-51

and an excerpt from Martin Luther King’s speech of April 4th, 1967.)

“Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Human One.” John 1:51

Perhaps because I am drawn to angels, those ineffable signs of God’s presence, I was struck by this image of angels ascending and descending on the Human One. This kind of reciprocal movement seems to me the heart of the practice of heaven on earth.

In today’s readings we hear that a vital part of this movement is about being known and understood, and coming to know and understand. Normally, my focus seems to be on knowing and understanding, but, again and again, the Bible emphasizes the opposite. It suggests that it is the powerful experience of feeling known and understood and accepted that unleashes the reciprocal desire in us.

We hear the power of being known in 1st Samuel. God’s call in the night to the boy Samuel is so personal, that Samuel assumes it is the priest Eli who is calling him. “Samuel, Samuel” that sense of being known by name gives the young boy the power to say to the God of the universe - “Here I Am--speak to me”. “I AM” is the essence of the power of presence, the ability to claim who we are, in relationship to others and to God.

We hear about the joy of feeling known in our psalm today. The psalmist almost seems ecstatic, as they articulate the power of his or her being known, even before they were born. What happens to us when we feel we are completely known, accepted and understood?

We hear about the power of being known in our gospel today. Jesus calls together a community of disciples who will each be known by name, each be known for who they are. Nathaniel has just been mocking the Podunk town of Nazareth: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Jesus, in turn, mocks his comic cool: “Behold one in whom there is no guile.” This makes Nathaniel feel like Jesus must have some kind of inner sight. Jesus says it is about something much, much, more powerful.

Contrast your experience of being among people who you feel see you, know you, understand you, accept and affirm you, with how we experience ourselves and life when we are amidst those who don’t see us, don’t hear us, those among whom we don’t feel known, understood and accepted. It almost feels like you are living in a completely different universe, which suggests we need to take this issue very seriously.

One of the greatest expressions we have in our scriptures of the power of being known and accepted and understood, comes in that great poem to love that we find in Paul’s letter to the

Corinthians (Corinthians 1:13). It concludes:

“When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. But when I became a man, when I grew up, I gave up childish ways. For now we see as though through a dark glass, but then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall understand fully---even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.”

Do you hear that little twist at the end? “Then I shall understand fully”--you think it’s going to end there. Instead there’s that quiet little addition--”even as I have been fully understood.” That little understatement changes everything. In Paul’s experience he has already been fully understood. Love is not a dream. It’s not a fantasy. It’s something that has already taken hold of him, and that, in turn, drives him to know it in all its fullness.

For Paul the sense of being known, being understood, being loved, even while he was out doing evil and harming people---is the experience that allows him to live a bold life--a life not controlled by fear. When we don’t feel alone, it can give us so much courage. Paul lives a life not controlled shame. He’s the patron saint of being a bull in a china shop. His love for those he had previously seen as unclean and cut off by God, leaves him willing to risk making every mistake in the world, so that they might know the acceptance and love of the God he has come to know. Sometimes the results are fairly disastrous, but he perseveres.

For Paul, being seen, being known, being accepted, being loved--is all that really seems to matter. Life is no longer a test of whether he is worthy or not, so now he can simply focus on what’s really important---loving. He’s free to love.

That freedom that comes with being known, being loved, being understood, unleashes the freedom to know, to love, and to understand. A child’s love is frequently defined by a desire to receive awards or avoid punishment. But being truly loved frees one to love with an agape love, the divine love that Martin Luther King defined as understanding, creative, redemptive, good will for all. This is the love that loves, because it loves. It’s not a conditional love. It’s not, I’ll love you if you do this or that for me, or if you become this kind of person. It’s, I love you simply because of who you are. It’s not a controlling love. It’s not, I love you so you need to do this for me. It’s what theologians call a kenotic love, a love that is able to practice the kind of self limiting and letting go, that allows the other to be free to be who they are, and become who they will become. When we feel seen, known, and loved for who we are, we are not dependent on others in the same way. Therefore, we can honor the mystery of who they are, as time unfolds.

Jesus said “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Human One.” John 1:51

In retrospect, John saw angels ascending and descending on Jesus as he was dying on the cross.

If the angels of God, the angels of knowing and understanding and loving could be present at that moment, then they can be present anywhere--anytime. No longer is there a realm of human experience that is outside the realm of this grace. If, in the midst of this kind of shame, terror, and pain--Jesus was God's holy beloved -- no reality can separate us from the love of God. Yet many of us live our lives as though we would rather die than have others know some aspect of who we are--risk others knowing us in all our fullness. Because we're afraid, we won't take the risk of letting others know us, and so we never come to know the power of being fully seen, fully known, fully understood, fully loved.

Let us let God help us to let go of that kind of fear, so that we might know, in ourselves, in our bodies, the power of being seen, being known, being understood, being loved, so that the incredible resurrecting power of understanding, creative, redemptive good will might spring forth in us, and we might then go forth to love, boldly, without counting the cost, without fear, without shame, so that others might come to know this joy and this life.

For if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.

NOTE: On this day, two sermons were preached. The second was the sermon above. The first was an excerpt from "**Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence**", Martin Luther King's speech given on April 4, 1967 at Riverside Church, exactly one year before he was assassinated.

Below is the excerpt which has language that has been inclusivized:

These are revolutionary times. All over the globe people are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression, and out of the wounds of a frail world, new systems of justice and equality are being born. The shirtless and barefoot people of the land are rising up as never before. "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. We in the West must support these revolutions.

It is a sad fact that because of comfort, complacency, a morbid fear of communism, and our proneness to adjust to injustice, the Western nations that initiated so much of the revolutionary spirit of the modern world have now become the arch anti-revolutionaries. This has driven many to feel that only Marxism has a revolutionary spirit. Therefore, communism is a judgment against our failure to make democracy real and follow through on the revolutions that we initiated. Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism. With this powerful commitment we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores, and thereby speed the day when "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made

low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.”

A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to humanity as a whole in order to preserve the best in our individual societies.

This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing -- embracing and unconditional love for all of humanity. This oft misunderstood, this oft misinterpreted concept, so readily dismissed by the Nietzsches of the world as a weak and cowardly force, has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of humanity. When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate -- ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: “Let us love one another, for love is God. And every one that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. The One that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is love.” “If we love one another, God dwelleth in us and God's love is perfected in us.” Let us hope that this spirit will become the order of the day.

We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. And history is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate. As Arnold Toynbee says:

“Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word.”

We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked, and dejected with a lost opportunity. The tide in the affairs of men does not remain at flood -- it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is adamant to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words, “Too late.” There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or our neglect. “The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on...” We still have a choice today; nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. “

**Note this except is taken from A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. edited by James M Washington.*