

GOD as Peace

The Fifth Sunday after Trinity

A few years ago, I stood behind this very podium and proclaimed to you that it was my mission to become wise. Some of you may remember, so I thought you might be interested to know just how far my quest has progressed. Suffice it say, my highway sign reads something like: Dallas 35, Wisdom infinity. Frankly, one who announces that his goal is to become wise probably reveals that the distance between he and wisdom is considerable.

One cannot be wise until one develops a defined sense of self. Most of us probably feel we have one, though a few pointed questions might blur the sharpness of our image. We are boys and girls, men, women, jocks, scholars, fathers, and mothers. We are environmentalists, deep sea well drillers, carnivores, vegetarians, Republicans, Democrats, Christians, Baptists, Islamists, atheists, priests, readers, organists, door-keepers and congregants. But, who are we really?

Like all of you, I can place many labels on myself, but I can never succinctly state who I am because I have been too busy living and adapting. I have been a son, a student, a teacher, a lover, a man, a husband, a friend, a wage earner, a father, a vestry member and now an old fart. I am all of those things, yet I am none of those things. None of us is who we seem to be. Worse, maybe none of us is really who we think we are. How can we be at peace with all this becoming? Alternatively, if God is Peace, how can we experience His peace when we are rarely in repose?

Poets cast a unique light upon the commonplace. Emily Dickenson, in her poem # 258, describes a peaceful moment many of us have experienced, filling it with melancholy, tragedy, gentle irony, and acceptance:

There is a certain slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses like the heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –
'Tis the Seal Despair –
Any imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the distance
On the look of death –

Imagine a crisp late Fall early winter day. The diffuse light glows orange upon leafless, skeletal tree limbs. Our hooded inner eye peers out upon the dying light as waves of melancholy wash over us. We are reminded of ends; the end of the day, the end of the season, the end of our innocence, the end of our lives. For a moment our soul reaches out and joins with the universe. We are not sad, but strangely aware. We are awash with the mortality of creation. In an instant the moment passes, but its imprint endures in us forever. Enigmatically, our awareness of the death of things leads us to peace, for it is then that we truly open ourselves to God, whatever name we wish to call Him by.

We heard in today's Collect:

Grant, O Lord, that the course of this world may soon be so peaceably ordered by Thy governance that Thy church may joyfully serve Thee in all godly quietness;

The more we read of the Church in the newspapers these days, the quieter we wish it would become, godly or otherwise. I don't mean to deflect the vision in this Collect. We must not rely solely upon The Church for governance or for Peace. We must stop becoming long enough to find the spot within ourselves where Peace resides. Then we can take up the burden of spreading it and absorbing pain. If life and pleasure existed without death and pain, would we really cherish our existence? Probably not. We'd march off to endless soccer games, dance recitals, meetings, and happy hours without ever stopping to reflect. Death is that troublesome little punctuator that causes us to pause and question who we are and why we are.

I don't wish to imply that we should become obsessed by death, though the mightiest and the weakest of us will be humbled by it. Our mortality creates a common bond that reaches across continents and creeds. This is the "heavenly hurt" that Emily experiences. All natural things share mortality. Unity not duality should be our resounding cry. If we could so govern ourselves, then the Church would require no hierarchy, no rules, no sin, no duality.

Duality brings us to St. Paul, and his Epistle to the Galatians, which some might think sends us pretty far afield from Peace and from governance with godly quietness. No other Biblical writer stimulates me like Paul. All this talk of Lust. Oh, gosh, what must have gone on in that man's mind. Paul writes, "the flesh lusted against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh." Anyone want to join me in wondering if Spirit lusts? Really, Paul? Where does this duality take us but along the road to self-loathing, self-deceit, and self-destruction? There is neither wisdom nor peace along this road.

If Paul had a do over, I hope he might have asked the Church to back off this concept of flesh waging war against Spirit. I hope he was a good Aristotelian, who sought the balance yielded by the practice of moderation. Nevertheless, Paul occasionally escapes from the muck of duality and scrambles onto the lofty ledge of the sublime. Quite movingly, he writes, "The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, long-

suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance ; against which there is no law.” Sounds wise to me. Sounds Joyful. Sounds Peaceful.

Our true self gets lost in the war waged between Spirit and Flesh. Long ago the Church created an either/or proposition, and we are still reeling from its conflict. Not only are we both Flesh and Spirit, we are so because God created us to be both. Witness Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. Far be it from me to anticipate God’s intention, but He imbued us with logical minds. Logic suggests to me that He was hoping for the integration of Flesh and Spirit, not the exclusion of one by the other. There is no Peace while this battle rages.

Like many of us, Paul seems to struggle with Self, but he also shares with us great wisdom. In chapter 13 of his 1st Epistle to the Corinthians Paul writes:

Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things; Love never faileth:

This is a vision of love that embraces and unifies. It is Peaceful. In it, there is neither duality, nor exclusion. It seems to provide us with God’s footprint by demonstrating how humankind can love others the way God must love all of His creation. Afterall, He set us free.

In today’s Gospel, John quotes the word of God made Man. Jesus describes a Trinity consisting of God, his human child, who translates for us, and us. No talk of sin, no talk of conversion, no talk of redemption, no talk of flesh/spirit duality. Simply,

I am in my father, and ye in me, and I in you. He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me; and he that loveth me shall be loved of my father, and I will love him, and manifest Myself to him.

Two simple commandments: Love God; Love your neighbor as yourself. Perhaps there are really three commandments. Love God, Love ourselves, and Love our neighbor. Therein we find both wisdom and peace. We reside in God as God resides in us. How’s that for unity? How’s that for Peace? It’s been there, right inside of us all along; In everyone else too, in all of Nature and throughout the universe. My wish is that each us stops becoming long enough to absorb this simple truth. So armed, perhaps in the orange glow of a late autumn afternoon, His warmth will touch us deeply where the meanings are.

I’ll leave you with a poem written by Wendell Berry, a modern American poet. In the quiet of creation, he finds peace and a liberating connection with the infinite.

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

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