

SERMON
“What’s Written On Your Heart?”
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St. John’s Chapel UCC

Jeremiah 31: 27-34

³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and **I will write it on their hearts**; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, **“Know the Lord,** “ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says Yahweh; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Luke 18: 1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps brothering me, I will grant her justice, so that, she may not wear me out by continually coming.” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

SERMON

Many years ago Luther coined the phrase, “The Priesthood of All Believers.” We Protestants have arrived at some remarkable interpretations of this phrase. My mother, who was extremely intolerant of Catholics, explained that Catholics believe we need a priest to be a mediator, a go-between who intercedes, to God on our behalf. Since my Protestant upbringing taught me that I could have a direct relationship with God, I assumed I had no need of a priest or that I was my own priest. Years later I worked with a Catholic woman who, as my spiritual director, guided me (more than any Protestant ever had) into a direct relationship with God...and don't tell me this is a recent phenomenon. The early mystics were all Catholics. Today I find myself arguing for a new definition of priesthood that may, I'm not certain, expand Luther's “Priesthood of All Believers.”

Priests, I now believe, simply introduce the arcane, the mysterious, to others as it has been introduced to them. The moment we are born into human existence we begin to have everyday experiences that open us to the mysterious realm of life. The moment we attempt to express these experiences to others – we become priests.

My granddaughter as a toddler reminded me how early and purely the realm of the Holy emotes through our eyes. She shares with me the beauty of a bright red flower growing in the neighbor's yard long before she has words to express the wonder she beheld. It was like being on a spiritual journey as she puts her little hand in mine and wobbles down the sidewalk in her favorite purple hat. She becomes my priest because she reminded me of the mysterious treasures of life that have become hidden to me. *“Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk...”*

Once we have a language with which to express life's mysteries, the hidden wisdom of life revealed to us, we might still find it hard to put our experience with God into words. For as

Dr. William Country explains in *Living on the Border of the Holy*, “Some things are known only through our direct involvement. You cannot know what it is to be in love until it happens to you. You cannot know what it is to stand, unprotected, in God’s presence until you are there.”

It can be helpful to imagine our human encounter with the HOLY as life in a border country. It is a country in which, at privileged moments of access, we find ourselves looking over from the everyday world into another, into a world that undergirds the everyday world, limits it, defines it, gives it coherence and meaning, drives it. Yet this hidden world is not another world, but the familiar world discovered afresh. It is the everyday world seen at new depth, with new comprehension. In the border country one discovers connections, roots, limits, meaning. To live there for a while is like having veils pulled away. In the long run we find that the border country is in fact the place we have always lived, but it is seen in a new and clearer light. *Living on the Border of the Holy*, p.8

“Paul Tillich speaks of God as “the depth” in things. To people who say they know no God, Tillich suggests that they call to mind their experiences of depth, wherever they occur – in beauty, in love, in terror, in wonder, in loneliness, in contingency, in peace. The experience of depth, he maintains, is the experience of God, for God is the depth-dimension of all reality.” *The Art of Christian Listening*, Thomas Hart, p.30

DEPTH, HOLY, DIVINE, TRUTH, LOVE – GOD, by any name, is never fully within our grasp and never adequately described by words. Yet the minute we attempt to unravel these unique pieces of the intimate, bottomless realm of the divine uniquely revealed to us, (and attempt we will for it’s part of our nature), we are priests. We are participants in the ministry of introducing life’s richness—of “windexing” the window panes so that others may see the Divine Lover standing there.

Now this does not mean we will necessarily grow up to be good priest. We can choose to use the power of the deepest truth revealed distinctively to us -- for *malice, guile, insincerity, envy and slander*. It means there is a strong, almost unavoidable, human tendency to want to engage in priestly discourse – to unveil the mysteries of life, the truths difficult to reveal because they are beyond language. For good or bad, the simple reality is we are all priests.

Even the dead can serve as priests, and often do – dead relatives, dead saints, dead poets, and sometimes even dead heretics. A great Saint of the 16th century had been our priest – our guide into the realm of the HOLY. With Saint Ignatius a group of us struggled through the heartache of losing Jesus. Ignatius asks that you pray the scriptures into life and live them as if you were present. By the time we got to Jesus’ trail and crucifixion, he had become our teacher, companion, and friend. We were in love with Jesus like we had never been before. The Lenten Season took on new meaning and cast us into deep grief. The war and the financial battle at the United Ministry Center, where I used to work, compounded my grief. As we moved forward to live Jesus’ resurrection into life I found I was stuck in grief.

So I prayed. “God, my friend Jesus and I are tired of hurting on this here cross. Enough is enough. Bring on the sponge of vinegar and get it over with. We’re ready, oh so ready to experience the joy of resurrection.” I prayed, “I’m weeping God because *Iggy* (our nickname for St. Ignatius) has dragged me through Lent, and I have experienced a Lenten Season like no other – and the utter, mocking stupidity of the human race. I so want to know the love of Christ, the love he held for humanity even on the cross, a love now turned to joy in his resurrection.” Nothing happened! And so I prayed and prayed and prayed.

Then out of the blue on the road to my Damascus (actually it was the road to Oklahoma City), the veil began to lift. And I knew, my God, I knew. I was not experiencing the joy and

love of the resurrected Jesus because I had turned my back on the particular priesthood to which I had been called. From there a vision began to grow. A vision of a place where men and women, the young and the old, people of all cultures and nationalities, straight and gay, rich and poor, and the ordained and unordained priests **came together as equals** to celebrate their encounter with God. A place where the seekers and those disenfranchised with religion would feel comfortable. A place where the voices of all were recognized and heard. If this priesthood were alive, I thought, if somehow I again could focus on working with God to create such a place, then I and others would experience the resurrected Jesus. The way I first envisioned this was through creative Sunday evening services at the United Ministry Center.

With this insight, grace, joy and love did not immediately come – it took the priestess Ann to complete my journey into the Borderland. I have a feeling she was totally unaware that she served as a priest to me that day. Sometimes we are priests unaware. Upon arrival in Oklahoma City I shared with my group what God was up to in my journey to them. We *Iggynites* broke early to go to lunch that day, to break bread together in celebration of our completion of St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* and to bid each other farewell. As we were walking out of the restaurant that day Anne came up to me and said, "Becky, I wanted you to know how much I enjoyed being in class with you. You are such a deep thinker. It also did my heart good to hear a minister, an ordained person, wrestle so with God. Thanks so for your honesty." And then she said, "I will be there at the opening worship service you've described." By the time we got to our cars my whole class had embraced her idea of attending this service. No one ever administered the sacraments of love as profoundly as Anne did that day. No one had ever told me I was "a deep thinker."

As the day passed, her words of love grew and the joy for which I had been searching found me -- for I had tasted the *kindness of the resurrected Jesus*. All the fear, doubts and inadequacies about the priesthood to which I was being called evaporated. Now don't think I moved into some Pollyanna, self-delusion of it all being easy and without risk. Experience has taught me that isn't true!

Days passed before another part of Ann's statement took residence in my thinking. "It also did my heart good to hear a minister, an ordained person, wrestle so with God. Thanks so for your honesty." I wondered, does Anne not realize her priesthood is on equal footing with that of an ordained priest or minister? Or maybe she does realize it and it did her heart good to hear an ordained minister admit to her weaknesses and uncertainties. Years of theological and biblical study and all the other course work of seminary do not necessarily make one a better priest, and certainly not a superior priest. Experience alone has taught us this. Temptation and sin flourishes within the clerical order from arrogance to authoritarianism, from indifference to the oppressed, to sloth, gluttony, hatred, superficiality, hypocrisy – to the hot item that keeps raising its ugly head, sexual abuse of children.

Granted, in the religious landscape in which most of us have grown up, subtle and obvious hints abound that the truly holy person in our midst is the ordained priest, minister, or pastor. This thinking has greatly inhibited the flow and the authenticity of the priesthood to which we were all born. All voices are needed in the mix. Each of our sojourns into the depths of life's mysteries represent only a fraction of the bigness of God. You may well be the one who has the fragment needed that will make mine fall in place. Then when another voice opens into the mix and then another and another – then maybe a portion of the grandness of God's

priesthood, and not just any old priesthood but a royal and holy priesthood, will be unleashed to bear unexpected fruit.

Clearly the vision did not take hold at the United Ministry Center at OU--the financial battle won out instead, as often it does in religiosity. Yet, the vision still lived in me. I just figured God would lead me to another place--a place where men and women, the young and the old, people of all cultures and nationalities, straight and gay, rich and poor , and the ordained and un-ordained priests would **came together as equals** to celebrate our encounter with God. A place where the seekers and those disenfranchised with religion would feel comfortable. A place where the voices of all were recognized and heard. A place where all were brave and courageous enough to speak the truth of their encounter with God.

So God sent me to you! (*Pause*) How do you think we are doing?

Stoles for the People

Stephan will soon have a service of recognition on November 14. His priesthood as a licensed minister will be recognized. In preparation for this grand and glorious day, let us put on the yoke of Christ (the stole of priesthood) and let the vision live—so that his first experience as a pastor will fully reside among a royal and holy priesthood of all.

(After being yoked with the stole of Christ and yoking someone with a stole, please be seated.)