

THE PRACTICE OF ENCOUNTER

SERMON BY REVEREND KATHLEEN HEPLER

FIRST PARISH IN FRAMINGHAM UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

NOVEMBER 22, 2009

READING

“Several years ago a woman spoke with me about her depression and lack of self-esteem. “My problem,” she explained in a highly agitated tone, “is that I come from a dysfunctional family.”

“I dislike that cliché,” I said. “Machines function or don’t. People love, hate, hope, despair, hurt, hit, hug, laugh, cry, destroy, create, and do and feel a million other things. But they don’t “function”

“I was never adored,” she said.

“Were you beaten, or verbally or sexually abused, or ignored?” I asked.

“No. As a matter of fact, I was rewarded and praised when I kept my room clean, got good grades, and went with the ‘right’ boys. And now my parents respect me because I am successful and make a lot of money. But they never adored me. And neither did my husband.”

“Do you think you should be adored?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“So do me,” I replied, without hesitation.

I was struck by how much we all secretly want to be adored and by how ashamed we seem to be of this desire. Psychologists are quick to attribute this wish to an infantile fantasy of being the center of everything, but I think they confuse adoration with idolization. Our basic desire is not to be placed on a pedestal but to be recognized as worthy of attention and love.¹

SERMON

The Practice of Encounter

Friday I went to the communion rail at St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in Wellesley and received the bread and the wine and a priestly blessing.

I know, I know...what? It was a total surprise to me too! I have been in many other Christian memorial services and sat quietly as communion was served, saying things to myself like:

¹ *To Love and Be Loved*, Sam Keen, Random House, N.Y., 1997, pgs. 196-197.

-I am a Unitarian Universalist therefore it would be disrespectful to participate in another's ritual rooted in beliefs to which I do not subscribe.

-If I don't believe in the literal meaning of communion then well, what is the point?

-Sitting three rows back are people here from my congregation, so I don't have anonymity in this matter!

-Am I truly invited to partake by the celebrant? Or am I the "other" in this situation?

Yet, Friday I kneeled to receive Holy Communion. And it was a natural as it could be. And, I'll tell you why.

The memorial service was for Mrs. Florence "Floss" Chesterton Norris who died on November 12th at the age of 102. I never met her although I wanted to. I wanted to meet her to thank her, because for many years, Mrs. Chesterton Norris has been a major benefactor to our church. Her second husband was a member here and she came with him for a good long time, even as she never considered herself anything other than an Episcopalian. She continued supporting us because, as she said many times, she recognized something here that made her "love this church".

By the time I came here to Framingham, she was quite deaf and could not see and not really up to meeting someone new. So, I went to the memorial to say thank you for her generosity.

At the service, I learned that Mrs. Norris said a prayer every morning and asked for God's blessing on her family and her friends, and that she asked God to bring wisdom to the hearts of the leaders of the world. After that prayer she read a Bible passage. She had gone through her Bible and underlined those passages most meaningful to her. When she could no longer see, her caretakers were able to discern what passages to read each day. Florence Chesterton Norris sang Happy Birthday to her daughter-in-law 8 hours before she died and she died with the 23rd Psalm on her lips. I learned that Mrs. Norris, with all of her monetary abundance, gave large amounts to the arts and to a myriad of causes that brought hope and comfort to those who need it most. I learned that she gave generously to five different area congregations...but not just her own Episcopal church. She gave to four other congregations across the theological spectrum including ours.

I heard this and I wondered, "Why?" Then her stepson rose to speak. What he said made her multi-faith generosity perfectly clear. "She had a way of making her own heart a mirror for the divine spark in anyone she encountered."

...making her heart a mirror for the divine light in anyone she encountered.

Mrs. Norris had seen the truth beyond religion through the eyes of one religion. And, when she observed this truth in other places, she wanted to support it. It was clear by her life story that she was a Universalist. The Universalist message is that God is love. The Universalist message is that beyond form and creed and custom and denomination and dogma and history, a love exists that transcends everything else. .. love that is not of our making, but which we carry and in which we can participate.

When the priest at the memorial service graciously made it clear that all were invited to the table without exception, that he hoped we would come forward ... I stood up. I knew that this was a communion of all souls, and I wanted to be there.

Mrs. Norris had many spiritual practices. The one I speak of today is the practice of “holy encounter”...the practice of making our own hearts a mirror for the divine light in others.

You know there is a woman at the window at Dunkin Donuts on Route 9 who is changing the world one interaction at a time. When you get your coffee from her she blesses you. She looks you in the eye and she sees you. She says some little word or another that tells you that somehow you are just the one she wants to be seeing. She is full of joy as you take your coffee in the dastardly, foam cup and hope no one sees you do it. You have gone to church at Dunkin’ Donuts, and you are better for the brief encounter and therefore your day unfolds in a more gentle direction. This is the practice of holy encounter.

Holy encounter is not just an idea or a theology or a moment that just happens (although sometimes it does...just happen!) It is a practice that can be intentional. It can be lived anytime anywhere you meet another. You don’t have to carve out time in your day to sit quietly or make a space in your house for it. You don’t have to find a guru or wear organic cotton clothes or take off your shoes at the door.

In many ways it is a simple practice. The next time you are at the grocery store, look a little longer in the eyes of the cashier and remind yourself that this being is more than she who will tally up your purchases or check the price of cranberries so that you can get out of there. Tell yourself, this is a person who struggles and celebrates, who yearns and who fails, who has had great moments and incredible sorrow. And then tell yourself that within that being is the light of the divine. As you practice you will begin to realize that often the connection grows up without anything transpiring except the slightly longer gaze and your thoughts. And this brief interaction will change both of you.

Jesus lived this way...in the practice of full and loving encounter with people across many borders and conventions. “In biblical tradition, the practice of encounter shows up most often as the practice of hospitality, or ‘philoxenia’. Take the word apart and you get philo, from one of the four Greek words for love, and xenia for stranger. Love of the stranger, in other words, which is about as counterintuitive as you can get. For most of us, “xenophobia” –fear of the stranger-comes much more naturally, but in this case scripture is unnatural. According to Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain, “the Hebrew Bible is one verse commands, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to ‘love the stranger’.”²

² *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor, Harper One, N.Y., 2009, pgs. 96-97

We are resistant to this practice at first, most of us. We have habits of thinking that keep us from the present in general, let alone in a focused adoring mindset! We can be duped into believing that some people don't have the spark of god within. We will be distracted by all that we must accomplish and have no encounter at all with dozens of people with whom we interact each day. We will imagine that such interaction will wear us out...that we don't have the energy to go about searching for god at the dry cleaners...that this will happen at church on Sunday or when we get away to the Zen Center and work on our practices.

Jesus knew that human beings would be resistant to encountering the sacred in others, which is why his living has continued to have impact to this day in my opinion. This from the gospel of Matthew:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord when was it that we saw you...?" Matthew 25: 34-37)

They heard what they were supposed to do...but they did not hear, even though it was stated over and over again, that in these interactions of care and attention, the sacred would be present.

In Buddhist thought, the recognition that every human being has an inalienable right to adoration is expressed in a daily ritual of greeting. Strangers and friends meeting on the street place their hands together in a prayerful gesture, bow to one another and say "Namaste" the god within me salutes the god within you.

The great wisdom traditions of the world all recognize that the main impediment to living a life of meaning is being self-absorbed.

The practice of encounter. Start with people you know and love. Move to the everyday people that you briefly meet at the gas station or the bank. Then move your practice to people who you have to see all the time who you do not like that much. Each of these is practice for the most difficult part...meeting those who we think of as our enemy with the eyes of a deeper knowing of their inherent worth and dignity. Take a day or a week to be quite intentional about this and see what happens.

In this place between us, where we practice encountering others with faithful eyes and open hearts that seek to be a mirror to the reflection of the divine light in others, miracles occur. We find that we are energized by the practice and that it affects the quality of time. In this practice we are going against the grain of a world that often seeks to see division: Shiite and Sunni, red state and blue state, Muslim and Jew,

legal and illegal. There is a way in which this practice can humble us into a certain unity that emanates from our common humanity. There is a way in which this practice can sometimes make us aware of a certain radiance that we can participate in but did not make.

What to call this radiance is another matter altogether. But it is the experience that matters and that is available to all regardless of any label. Perhaps it is only the poets who can approach the naming. Wordsworth says it this way:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense of sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

So I say that it is a simple and portable practice and encourage it. It will change us forever and may well be the only practice needed. It will not protect us from death or bring life everlasting...but it will wake us up to the life that is living us and that wants us to know it beyond our differences.

There is a desire in each of us, in the deep center of ourselves that we call our heart. We were born with it, it is never completely satisfied, and it never dies. We are often unaware of it, but it is always awake. It is the human desire for love. Every person on this earth yearns to love, to be loved, to know love. Our true identity, our reason for being, is to be found in this desire.³

William Blake: And we are put on earth a little space
That we might learn to bear the beams of love.⁴

³ *The Awakened Heart, Living Beyond Addiction*, Gerald May, Harper San Francisco, 1991, p.1

⁴ *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, William Blake.

The Thanksgiving holiday is here. Whomever you sit with at the table this week: crotchety Uncle Joe or depressed sister Maria....loving friend Alice....funny grandpa Al....make there your practice of holy encounter.

The story of our Thanksgiving holiday is a communion story. However true it is in fact, and however poorly we have lived this communion as time has gone by, it is yet another story about our innate ability to bear the beams of love, and our innate need for it. As we sit at tables this week...let us realize that wherever we are is the table of human communion, the wine and the bread of love. In us and between us it flows. By it we are fed and our thirst is quenched. And this is the purpose of our birth and the hope of the world.