

THE WISE STILL SEEK HIM
THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

(01/08/17)

Scripture Readings: Psalm 27:1-14
Isaiah 55:1,6-7
Matthew 2:1-12

*Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:6-7)*

This past week I saw a bumper sticker that read, “Wise Men Still Seek Him.” I like that bumper sticker. The reason I like it is because it is one of the more humble bumper stickers; it doesn’t treat God as a possession that I have but other people don’t have. I don’t particularly relate to theological articulations that treat God or faith as a possession; I prefer to think of my relationship with God as a relationship, and my faith as not something that I “have,” but something that is very much a work in process.

By the way, I don’t want you to get the impression that all I do is ride around all day reading bumper stickers or that I receive the inspiration for most of my sermons from the rear end theological declarations of passing motorists. I do read the Bible and other books, and I also go to conferences. But since Darlene and I put 25,000 miles on both of our cars every year, I have the opportunity to read a lot of bumper stickers. Some, by the way, are better than others. Also, when I’m riding along just listening to Pink Floyd, Tool, Brahms’ *German Requiem*, or my Joseph Campbell or Steven Hawking cd’s, I have a few moments of leisure to reflect on the deeper meaning of these theological declarations as well as the deeper message of numerous other bumper sticker messages such as “Caution--Show Dogs Inside.”

Those “caution” bumper stickers, by the way, strike me as particularly curious. The assumption seems to be that if I know there are show dogs inside the car, I will be more careful not to smash into it. I actually saw a delivery van last year with a sign that read, “Caution--Wedding Cakes Inside.” Boy, I tell you, I just backed right off when I read that! I don’t like to see people hurt or killed in traffic accidents, nor do I want to be hurt or killed myself, but above all, I would never want to ruin someone’s wedding by rear-ending the cake delivery van. But I digress, although it does say something about our values, our “first world values.”

Wise men still seek him. As you note from the sermon title printed in the bulletin, I have revised the language of the bumper sticker to make it more inclusive. There is no need to state this theological affirmation in a way that excludes women or which makes it seem that only men seek God. Although I can sing the beautiful old hymns that speak of “man” and “men” instead of “people” without the language becoming too much of a distraction, I am glad our church uses the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, a translation that avoids sexist language and uses inclusive rather than exclusive pronouns. The old exclusive masculine language is *passee*, and we should change it wherever we can. There is just no excuse in this day and age for talking about people as men, and there are many good reasons why we shouldn't.

The wise still seek him. This bumper sticker describes the Christian faith as a journey or a pilgrimage. It encourages us to think of our relationship with God as a process, as something that is evolving, to think of our faith journey as a quest, like the quest of the Knights of the Round Table for the Holy Grail that had become lost to the church through the Dark Ages.

The wise still seek him. We gather here this morning because we seek to understand God more fully and experience God in our worship. We have also come here this morning because we seek to understand ourselves more fully and to experience the deeper spiritual dimension of ourselves from which we so often become separated in the busyness of our secular life.

I don't usually find myself in theological agreement with John Calvin, the Protestant reformer. I don't like his doctrine of predestination, and I think he was a tyrant in Geneva. However, in the introduction to his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (which I confess I have not read in its entirety), Calvin tells us that the more we learn about God, the more we will understand ourselves, and the more we learn about ourselves, the more we will understand God.

I think this is a very powerful theological statement. It encourages us to go back and forth between trying to understand God and trying to understand ourselves, with the assumption that whatever we learn in either realm will throw light upon the other. This is a wonderful guideline for someone who professes to teach and practice the psychology of religion.

Let's think about the implications of what Calvin is suggesting. In order for us to seek something or someone, it seems that they have to be both separate and separated from us.

To be sure, there are times when we feel both separate from and separated from God. We may feel separated or alienated from God because of our sin. We may feel separated from God because we have neglected to nurture and deepen this relationship, because we do not talk with

God either in formal prayer or in daily conversation, and we do not listen to what God might be saying to us. We may feel separated from God during a time of personal trial or tragedy. Most of us know the feeling of being separated or alienated from God, from our fellow human beings, and from the deepest core, the true center of ourselves.

At those times when we feel separated, alienated, and alone, we need to follow the advice of scripture and turn back to God. We need to seek God. We need to seek to reestablish our relationship with God. We need to seek God's guidance, to discern God's will for our lives. We need to seek healing for our brokenness. At those times when our faith is ebbing low, we need to remember the promises of Jesus: that those who truly seek will find.

Throughout the scriptures, we find the admonition, the directive to seek God. In the first Book of Chronicles, we are told to

*seek the Lord and his strength,
seek his presence continually. (I Chronicles 16:11)*

We are told to

set your mind and heart to seek the Lord your God. (I Chronicles 22:19).

Many of the psalms tell us we should seek the Lord. Psalm 27, a psalm of devotion and a prayer for deliverance from enemies, tells us

*One thing I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple. . . .
"Come," my heart says, "seek his face!"
Your face, Lord, do I seek.*

The passage that we heard this morning from the Book of Isaiah advises us to

*Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

Jesus, of course, tells us time and again to seek the kingdom of God.

We all know what it means to feel separated or alienated from God. We know what it means to seek God in scripture, in worship, in our spiritual disciplines. We seek to discern God's will for our lives. We seek to become conscious of God's presence among and within us.

In his spiritual exercises, Ignatius of Loyola advised us to set some time aside in the middle of every day and again when we go to bed to practice what was originally called the Examination of Conscience. The original purpose of this discipline was to reflect upon our thoughts, our feelings, our behavior, to become aware of the ways in which we failed to be the people that God calls us to be.

Since Vatican II this discipline has come to be called the Examination of Consciousness. It is a time that we set aside every day to see where God has encountered us. This practice has the goal of helping us to become more conscious of God's presence in our life.

The evolution of the understanding of this spiritual exercise is an interesting development because it witnesses to another way of looking at our relationship with God, sort of the flip side of our sermon theme. It challenges us to think about what it really means to seek God since we can never be separated from God. It is not as if God is in some places and not others. It is not as if God is with us when we are good and apart from us when we are bad. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, nothing can separate us from the love of God that was shown to us in Christ Jesus.

I believe both ways of looking at the spiritual discipline of seeking are true. On one hand, we can certainly seek God. On the other hand, since we can never be separated from God, it doesn't make any sense to seek God. It would be like a fish setting out on a journey to seek the ocean. The ocean is all around the fish and also inside it. If the ocean were not there, the fish would not be there.

Even though we can never be separated from God, it does make sense to seek God because we can be separated from an awareness of God's presence. This is what I like about the Examination of Consciousness, for it helps us become more conscious of God's presence in our daily life. God's presence and love are realities that can never change. Just like the ocean and the fish, if God were not here we would not be here. We are in God and God is in us. God is in every fiber of our being.

However, if we are not conscious of that presence, we can live our life as if God were not. When we discover we are doing this, we do need to turn ourselves around and seek God's

face, seek to enter into God's presence or into the kingdom or realm of God once again. And, as Calvin suggests, we can start by looking into the depths of ourselves.

Matthew's account of the magi's visit is a story about seeking. The magi were probably Babylonian astrologers. Since the story has no parallel in any other first-century Christian writing, there is no way to determine whether it actually "happened" or whether Matthew was using an ancient myth to tell us something important about our relationship with Christ.

The legend of the magi is about God's search for us, God's attempt to encounter us. It is also about our seeking for God. It tells us that the search involves faith, the faith that if we follow the star we will find that which we seek. It tells us that this search is not an easy search; it involves a journey, for Jesus was obviously not born in the town where the wise men lived. The faith journey always seems to run counter to common sense; the "practical people" see it as a waste of time. The journey is beset by dangers--the regressive and power-dominated Herod-systems of the world and of our own psyche. But the journey leads to discovery and to new life for all who embark upon it.

At the end of their journey, just as John Calvin would have predicted, the wise men found both God and themselves.

Marco Polo once told of a Persian village he discovered from which, so the villagers claimed, the three kings started on their journey. According to the villagers, when the three kings returned they told the villagers what they had seen, what they had found. The young king told his listeners that he had found a young Christ; the king who was middle aged found a Savior his own age; and the old king found in Christ an old Companion. This legend tells us that we all find what we need in Christ, for Christ is our true life.

The wise still seek him. Seek and you will find. But beware, for when you find what you seek, you will never be the same again.

As we enter into this New Year as individuals and as a church, let us seek that God who is not far from any one of us.

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