

HINTS OF TRANSCENDENCE

(10/20/19)

Scripture Lesson: James 5:13-19

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” (James 5:16)

Last Sunday, following our celebration of the Sacrament of Infant Baptism, we examined Jesus’ teaching that unless we become like little children, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. We noted several characteristics of children that could lead us to the experience of being in the kingdom of heaven. One of the most important of these is the sense of wonder, magic, mystery, and awe—the sense of the transcendent that we all had as children but sadly seem to have lost along the way.

The sense of the transcendent that we all had as children, but sadly seem to have lost along the way. This innate sense of wonder, the sense that there is a deeper level of reality than the everyday world in which we live—this may be why we are fascinated by babies and little children. They have one foot (at least) in the “other world,” the world or realm from which we came before we were born, to which we will return after we die, and which we carry with us and within us throughout our life. Religion is an attempt to address the third of these—to strengthen our relationship with the spiritual realm that we carry with us and within us throughout our life.

William Wordsworth, one of the founders of English Romanticism, speaks to this in his poem, “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.” If I had thought of it, I could have used several lines of this ode last week. For example, his phrase “The child is father of the man” echoes Kahlil Gibran’s reminder that our children can give birth to something beautiful in us. Wordsworth says,

*There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Appareled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore:--
Turn wheresoe’er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.*

What Wordsworth is saying here reminds me of a line from one of my favorite cuts from Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*. Roger Waters, in “Comfortably Numb,” writes

*When I was a child, I caught a fleeting glimpse out of the corner of my eye.
I turned to look, but it was gone; I cannot put my finger on it now.*

*The child is grown, the dream is gone.
I have become comfortably numb.*

Wordsworth tells us that the magical world “appareled in celestial light,” which he was able to see as a child, has slipped away; he can no longer see it. He goes on to say,

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life’s Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy.*

Our birth brings us from one world into another. This birth is both a sleep and a forgetting. We lose touch with the world from which we came, from “God who is our home.” We came into this world “trailing clouds of glory,” but,

*At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.*

This theme was echoed by Roger Waters when he talks about his own experience of how, following the death of his father in the war, smothered by a controlling mother, and bullied at school, “shades of the prison-house begin to close upon the growing boy,” and how he (and all of us) become just “another brick in the wall.”

In the course of becoming socialized, grounded in the world of space and time, the world of cause and effect, we lose a sense of the eternal realm from which we came. When this happens, we stop believing in miracles. We stop believing in God. We lose our deep connection with nature and with each other. Our world becomes increasingly sterile, dead, devoid of any deeper meaning. And then—Jesus calls us back to the sense of the transcendent that we once knew as a child.

In the prison-house of our souls, synchronistic events, events that cannot be rationally explained but which we find as deeply meaningful, become reframed or recast as simply coincidence. Yet we know that there are times when they are more than this.

A coincidence, according to Webster, is the occurrence of events that happen at the same time by accident but seem to have some connection. Coincidences are not meaningful. We generally think of a coincidence as fortuitous, though they don’t have to be. Scientists view a

coincidence through the lens of statistical probability.

However, there are times when something happens that strikes us as more than coincidence. It strikes us as deeply meaningful. To explain this experience, C. G. Jung draws from the Eastern concept of synchronicity, which he defines as an “a-causal connecting principle.” The events are not connected through the mechanism of cause and effect, yet they are not random. They are connected on a much deeper level, the level of meaning. This connection is so powerful that one event can actually cause or give rise to another. Our thoughts and feelings can actually affect matter.

When I think of coincidences, I recall an occasion when, on a flight from Boston to Omaha, I initiated a conversation with the woman sitting next to me. I don’t usually do this. I am different from my wife, who initiates conversations and finds points of connection with everyone on the plane. I prefer to sit in silence and read my book.

For some reason I was chatty that day. The woman asked me where I was going, and I told her. She told me she had just come from visiting her son and his family. I asked her where they live. She said they lived in Foxborough. I asked her what street they live on. She said Country Club Lane. I asked her if her son played a game with a funny-shaped leather ball every Sunday. She laughed and said he did. I told her that my wife and I live only a couple of houses away from Steve and Robbie Grogan.

What are the odds that Steve’s mother and I would not only be on the same plane to Omaha, but also end up sitting next to each other? Not great. What are the odds that I, an introvert, would get in a conversation that would last long enough to find a point of connection between us? Not great. Yet there was no deeper meaning to the event. It struck me as a coincidence, but one of no great import.

Sometimes, however, an event strikes us as more than mere coincidence. This often happens when I drive from my home to my office on the other side of town. There is a donut shop in downtown Foxborough. Every morning, as I approach the center of town, I say a little prayer to my guardian angel. I say, “If you really want me to have a donut, then open up a parking space for me in front of the donut shop.” And you know what? This happens every single day—though it’s usually around the fifth or the sixth time that I circle the block. Now that strikes me as a little more than coincidence!

Every Sunday we pray for those members or friends of our church family whose names appear on our prayer list. We do this because we believe that prayer makes a difference. We

know it makes a difference to the person who prays; we feel different when we pray. We also believe it has a positive effect on the person for whom we pray.

In this church, we have experienced moments when our prayers, either for ourselves or someone else, seem to have made an appreciable, perhaps even a dramatic difference. We suspect that our individual prayer or the prayers of the members of our prayer chain have helped someone to recover from an illness against all odds, or to recover quicker than one would expect. But how does this happen?

In our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Exploration Reading Group, we are currently reading the chapter in C. G. Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, that addresses our experiences of and our beliefs about life after death. Jung notes that we cannot say with certainty what happens after we die. However, he says, we have hints. The experiences we have in waking life and in our dreams, the stories that other people share with us, and the stories that are contained not only in our Bible but in the sacred scriptures of all the world religions give us hints, little glimpses into this transcendent realm. Note that Jesus, in his parables and in his teachings, never spells it out clearly; he just gives us hints; he gives us glimpses; and these hints and glimpses give us hope.

I have my own way of understanding what happens when we pray. It is not the only way and it may not even be the best way, but it makes sense to me. I believe we are all connected with one another on the very deepest of levels. We all find our grounding in a vast energy and informational field which we can call "God." This God, whom Paul Tillich calls "the Ground of All Being," creates us, flows through us, and guides the unfolding of our life. This God is impersonal in that it becomes incarnate in all that is, but this God is also personal, is related to us as closely and personally as a mother or father to a beloved child. When we pray, as we enter into this field, we experience a deep connection with the person for whom we pray. Our prayer, our presence can strengthen the healing power that is already present within the person. We could call this field that connects us, that connects all of us as "the kingdom of God."

As I mentioned, this is only one way of understanding the efficacy of prayer. The bottom line, however, is that some events cannot be fully explained. When we look at them through the eyes of faith, however, we encounter the mysterious presence, the guiding hand of God behind the scenes. As William Cowper wrote back in 1774,

*God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea, And rides upon the storm.*

Deep in unfathomable mines Of never-failing skill

He treasures up His bright designs, And works His sovereign will.

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break In blessings on your head.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err, And scan His work in vain;
God is his own interpreter, And He will make it plain.*

When we open our hearts in prayer and worship, we strengthen and deepen our relationship with this mysterious Spirit within us. When we listen carefully for that still, small voice, miraculous things can happen.

Consider the following true-life story, submitted by Kimberly Wood of Hornell, New York to the December 2012 edition of *Guideposts*. Kimberly's experience encourages us to think about the power of intercessory prayer, about our deep interconnectedness with each other, and about whether some of the things that happen in our life, some of the unexpected things, some of the mysterious things, some of the most meaningful things are truly random, just coincidence, or whether they are more than coincidence. Her experience leads us to look for the unseen hand of God that is working for good, for health and healing, behind the scenes in our lives.

"Lisa, Pray for Lisa." It was the strangest thing, this urge that suddenly came over me. It was as if an actual voice had spoken, firm and commanding.

Pray for Lisa? I prayed for my six-year-old daughter every night, just like I did for her brother and sister. But why now?

We were on the road, headed to my parents' house for Christmas. Lisa was riding with my brother Bobby up ahead. I was following along in my car with my two other children. Bobby was holding the speed limit, just like I had asked him to. Lisa turned to wave at me through the back window. Everything seemed fine.

"Pray for Lisa. Now!" The voice again, even more emphatic.

A chill ran through me. "Lord, please watch over Lisa. Keep her out of harm's way. Wrap your protecting arms tight around her."

Up ahead, Bobby slowed. I could see a semi-truck directly in front of him. Its trailer was weaving back and forth. Something was clearly wrong with it. The trailer bounced and then fishtailed. Bobby's brake lights flared.

Then, to my horror, the trailer detached from the driver's cab. "Lord, keep Lisa safe!" I cried.

Bobby swerved. Just enough to escape a collision with the runaway trailer.

Thank God, Lisa was safe. Thank God for the voice, I thought.

But I could only watch helplessly as the trailer slid into the other lane—smashing into an oncoming car. Bobby and I both pulled over and rushed to the demolished vehicle. The backseat behind the driver was completely crushed.

"Is everyone okay?" I gasped.

“I think so,” the driver said. He, his wife and their teenage daughter climbed out, shakily, but unharmed.

The man stared at the backseat and let out a deep breath. “We just stopped a couple of minutes ago and our daughter switched places with the Christmas gifts,” he told us. “If she had still been sitting there . . .” He didn’t have to say more.

The man then introduced himself and his wife.

“And what’s your name?” I asked their daughter.

“Lisa,” the little girl replied.

For whom was Kimberly’s prayer intended—her Lisa, the Lisa in the other car, or both? Why did the other family stop? Why did Lisa change places with the Christmas gifts? There was no reason to do this, but to do so saved her life. There was no reason other than Kimberly’s prayer--and the fact that Kimberly, a woman of faith, trusted in the guidance of that inner voice. Who was the author of this inner voice? For people of faith, people who have managed to retain a sense of the transcendent, it is obvious that God reached out to save a little girl’s or two little girls’ lives, but the miracle would not have happened without Kimberly’s trusting belief in the power of prayer.

In the process of becoming like little children, we open ourselves to the magic, the mystery, the spiritual dimension of life that flowed through us as children but which, sadly, may have begun to slip away, may have begun to elude us as adults. If we open our minds and our hearts in our prayer, in worship, in those special, synchronistic moments like Kimberly’s, in our dreams, we may once again experience hints of transcendence, hints of that realm from which we came, to which we return, and which we carry with us and within us throughout our life.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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