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April 25, 2021

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

The Pastor's Reflection

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. is also available in audio form on our “Pod Cast” site as part of a devotional service. To access it, click on the link at the top of the Sermons page.

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 3:16-17
John 2:13-22

“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s spirit dwells in you?”
(*1 Corinthians 3:16*)

Last week I shared a reflection on Mary Magdalene’s experience of the risen Christ on the first day of the week following his death. The primary focus of the reflection was Jesus’ request that Mary not cling to him. We considered the possibility that the reason why Jesus says this to Mary, why he tells her not to cling to him as he is, in what is basically a human form, is that this human form is dead. We recalled that, prior to his encounter with Mary by the tomb, in his last days with his disciples, Jesus told them that it actually was to their advantage that he was destined to die. If he did not die, his disciples, his followers would continue to “have him” in human form, but because they had him in this form, they would never be able to discover or experience him in a new way, as the risen Christ, as the Holy Spirit within them.

If you recall, last week we examined the similarity between that biblical passage and the Buddhist teaching, “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” These two teachings, one by Jesus and one by the Buddha, two great teachers, two spiritual giants who have a lot in common, call us to consider the deeper meaning of death. From a physical perspective, of course, death appears to be the end, the cessation of life. However, these two teachings encourage us to consider whether death is not the cessation

of life, as we believe, but rather the cessation of the human form, the physical, material form of life. It is a fundamental dogma, a fundamental affirmation of our Christian faith that from a spiritual perspective, death can be an agent of transformation. Death can lead to resurrection, rebirth, to incarnation in a new and different form.

This is not just a matter of faith, of religious dogma; it is also an unquestioned scientific truth. The Law of the Conservation of Matter and Energy tells us that nothing is ever lost to the universe; it can only be changed in form. Long before Einstein's formulation of the relationship of matter to energy in the early 1900's, his discovery that the amount of energy we can obtain from a chunk of matter equals the mass of the matter multiplied by a constant, the velocity of light squared, Antoine Lavoisier, a French nobleman who had the misfortune of living at the time of the French Revolution, recognized the importance of oxygen and the role that oxygen plays in combustion. In this, Lavoisier disproved the prevailing phlogiston theory, which was cute but basically stupid. We learned about this in high school chemistry. But that's not the point. In 1789, Lavoisier formulated the Law of the Conservation of Matter and Energy. This is why Thomas Kuhn mentions Lavoisier in his masterpiece *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Unfortunately, Lavoisier, who became known as the father of modern chemistry, did not live a long and fruitful life. He was guillotined along with numerous clergy, members of the nobility, and scientists.

But that's not the point. What was the point? Oh yes, the point is that if this is true of the universe, it could also be true of Jesus, of our loved ones, and also of us. Nothing is ever lost! It can, however, change form. As I suggested last week, in letting go of our loved ones when it is no longer possible for them to remain in human form and, in fact, it might be quite painful for them to do so, we may discover them in a new and different way, not just in our memories but in life.

After reading last week's Keeping in (Virtual) Touch or listening to the audio version of my reflection, many of you contacted me by email or text and asked me if I could say a little more about this theme. Actually, the word "many" may not be technically correct in this context; it may be an overstatement, perhaps even a slight exaggeration. Actually, the word "slight" here may also not be the most accurate descriptor of the extent of my previous exaggeration; it may be an understatement. In any event, several of you asked me to expound further on this theme. Please, don't try to draw me into a discussion of technicalities about exactly how many persons it takes to justify the use of the adjective "several." That's not the point. The point is that I would like to say a little more about the relationship of matter and energy, of physical and spiritual "form," because I think it's important. It could be helpful in understanding what happened to Jesus through his death and resurrection, what has happened to our loved

ones who have “passed over to the other side,” and what might happen to us not only after we die but also, and perhaps more importantly, in this life.

In these reflections, just as in the sermons that I preach, I try to use a passage of scripture from our own Christian tradition or a teaching of any of the other world religions, any of the other spiritual paths, to help us understand God and ourselves more fully, to help us relate to God and ourselves on a deeper level. As I write the reflection or the sermon, I often think of one or two people who could possibly benefit from grasping the deeper meaning of that particular teaching or passage of scripture and perhaps even my exposition, my elucidation of it. These people might be parishioners; they might be counselees; they might even be members of my family! Sometimes the reflection might even be aimed at me. (Actually, all of my reflections are aimed at me!)

I do have to admit that I am always a little disappointed when I step into the pulpit on a given Sunday morning only to discover that the specific person or persons whom I had in mind when I wrote the sermon are not present. I say a little prayer for them; I hope they will eventually read the printed version of the sermon and realize it is speaking to them. When it comes to the rest of you, those who do not attend our church, I am always a little disappointed to learn that you never got around to reading or listening to the particular reflection that, at least in my mind, was aimed specifically at you. May I have the impudence, the temerity to suggest that the only way to prevent this from happening is to read them all in a timely manner?

Last week, as I prepared for Ursula’s funeral service, I had Bill in mind; I also had Bill and Ursula’s children, Bill and Lisa, and Bill and Ursula’s grandchildren, Dylan, Devan, and Violet in mind. I wondered how these three young children thought about death, what it meant to them to lose their “Oma.” In addition, I also had several of us in mind, several of us who have lost loved ones to death. The more I thought about it, the more I realized how many of us have lost loved ones. I realized that Jesus’ teaching about death and also the Buddhist teaching, both of which address the matter of clinging, of holding on, of grasping, might speak a word of hope to absolutely all of us, for absolutely all of us have been touched by loss.

Today, I would like to share an experience I had approximately six years after my father’s death. This happened in the summer of 1999 during my first trekking pilgrimage through India, Nepal, and Tibet. I know that when I returned, I shared the profound impact that this experience had on me in a Sunday morning sermon, probably as one of a series of sermons I preached on lessons I learned from my Tibetan pilgrimage. It doesn’t matter. I venture to say that not many of you reading this or listening to this now were in church that particular Sunday in the fall of 1999. The few of you who were, now being

of advanced age and perhaps even slowly advancing or even sliding rapidly into your dotage, have probably long ago forgotten what I said. Please understand; I am not throwing stones here; I can watch "Monk," "Columbo," "Poirot," "Sherlock Holmes," and even the Hallmark murder mystery series repeats and fail to remember who committed the crime and why, even though I watched the show only a month or two ago. As I say, I am not throwing stones.

For the three or four of you who were present that Sunday in the fall of 1999 and who actually remember what I said, I think you would like to hear the story again!

My father and I were very close not only when I was a child but throughout most of my adult life. My father's core values, the values out of which he lived his life were (1) religious faith; (2) family; (3) work; (4) life-long learning; and (5) athletics. Like father--like son (at least in some cases, and certainly in mine). I am a Christian minister with a wonderful family, someone who not only loves his work but loves to work, a life-long learner who played baseball and lacrosse at the college level and who holds a black belt in karate. You can see why my dad and I were so close and why we enjoyed each other's company.

My dad lived in a relatively small world. He never finished high school. He found he could make a good deal of money, even in his teens, pitching semi-pro baseball, and he did not have the kind of supportive parents (the kind that I had) who could advise him that this was not a good strategy to prepare for life. He was actually offered a full scholarship to attend Brown University if he would pitch on their baseball team; he thought that was stupid, and his parents did not tell him firmly and unequivocally that his refusal of the offer was the epitome of stupid. Other than a stint in the Pacific Navy during WWII and the year we lived in California, my freshman year in high school, he did not travel. He never read the books or had many of the experiences I had, experiences like living in Germany, studying in Switzerland, and traveling around Europe with my family. These were, however, experiences which he supported and which he helped to make possible in one way or another.

My dad loved to have me tell him about things I experienced or learned. When I changed my major from pre-med biology and chemistry to philosophy in college, he couldn't get enough information on what philosophy, what metaphysics and epistemology were all about. In a sense, he saw parts of the world that he had not experienced and that he could not experience through my eyes. It wasn't that he lived his life vicariously through me. In his small world, he had a rich and fulfilling life. This was possible because he was an introvert and because he had a deep spirituality.

Darlene would attest that my dad was genuinely interested not only in what our children were doing, but also in what she was doing, what she was teaching, especially in her experiences teaching English as a second language. When Darlene would tell him about a little child who had recently come to this country and who felt alienated and confused because she didn't know a word of English, my father would tear up and cry. He had an amazing amount of empathy! It was like he was really there with and for that little child.

In the summer of 1999, our son, Corey, and I embarked upon a six-week trekking pilgrimage through India, Nepal, and Tibet. Our first week on the trail in northwest Nepal, we trekked in an area that our Sherpa guide referred to as the foothills of the Himalayas. To a sedentary middle-aged minister-psychologist who was not in great physical condition, any trail that goes uphill, let alone a trail that takes you up over 18,000 feet should not be described as a stroll through the foothills! It was a difficult trek, especially since I was sick with dysentery for almost the entire six weeks. But that isn't the point. The point is that I wished I could have shared this experience with my dad, that I could have told him what I experienced when I returned. Unfortunately, I couldn't. My dad died on the date of Darlene's and my anniversary in November of 1993.

In northwestern Nepal, as we walked along the trail leading up into the Tibetan plateau, little children from mountainside villages would run to greet us. These children were poor. They were *really* poor. Their families eked out a meager existence growing barley and raising animals on the terraced sides of the foothills.

As I said, these children would spot us coming a mile away. How could you miss a group of obviously well-fed people from around the world decked out in brand new North Face or REI gear? They knew that we had something they didn't have. I guess you could categorize the children as beggars, but for some reason, that term didn't seem to fit them. They were simply asking us to give them something they didn't have and that their parents couldn't provide for them, something they had little chance of obtaining on their own.

What do you think these children asked of us? What do you think they wanted? What did they need? You might think these children would ask us for money. Pocket change for us was a year's income to them, for they had little opportunity to obtain the currency that would allow them to buy things they couldn't make, things like clothes, shoes, warm coats, perhaps even toys for the youngest, perhaps tools for their parents. You would think they would beg for money. This would certainly make sense. But they didn't.

These little children came running down the path toward us yelling “Got paper?” “Got pencil or pen?” They were begging for a pen or pencil and some paper on which they could write, on which they could draw. When I realized what it was that they wanted, for they asked us in English, I was dumbfounded and overwhelmed with emotion! The most important thing in these children’s lives was not money that would empower them and their families, not food for their stomachs, but the opportunity to learn! They wanted an education! Suddenly it dawned on me that the drive for creativity was stronger than any other drive! When we stopped to spend some time with them, which I always did, when we wrote out the English alphabet or sang the “ABC’s” for them and then gave them the pen and paper so they could practice later on their own, they were thrilled! Their dirty little faces were absolutely beaming. We walked away humbled, realizing how much we take for granted.

After one of these encounters, as we continued along the trail, I thought about how much I would have liked to share this experience, this realization with my dad. He would have loved to hear it. He would have cried, just as I would have cried in telling it. I wanted him to be able to see, to experience this through my eyes, through my experience. But I couldn’t.

Then, all of a sudden, I started to cry. I must have cried for two straight hours. Corey and everyone else in my small trekking group were stunned. (Apparently, the general consensus is that I am one who is seldom given to the verbal expression of strong emotions. In my defense, I always get choked up when I watch *Field of Dreams* or *The Princess Bride*.) I have never cried so much or so deeply in my life.

At first, I thought that this outpouring of emotion was an expression of how deeply touched I was, how deeply saddened I was at the plight of these Nepalese children. The more I thought about it, however, the more I realized that I didn’t really feel sorry for them. I did momentarily entertain the possibility that I could return to that area sometime in the near future, take up residence for a year or two in the Tibetan Buddhist monastery where we had spent the previous night, learn Tibetan, learn about Tibetan Buddhism, and teach both the monks and the little Nepalese children English and other stuff. As much as I would have liked to do this, I had to admit that the plan was unrealistic. In any event, I quickly realized that my tears had little to do with the plight of these little children.

My second thought about the outpouring of my feelings was that the tears that found expression in such a powerful way were an expression of grief from my father’s death. I recalled that I had not cried at the time of his death or even when I officiated at

his memorial service. I got choked up at various points during the memorial service, but I didn't cry. Maybe these were the tears that, for one reason or another, I had not expressed but had been storing up inside me.

All of a sudden, I realized it wasn't grief that I was feeling and expressing; it was joy! I realized *my dad was actually seeing and experiencing the encounters with these little Nepalese children through me!* I was his eyes and ears after his death just as I had been his eyes and ears before his death! I realized that *he was actually on the trail with me*, that he was within me, and that everything I saw and experienced was seen and experienced by him!

This is why I am not sad about my father's death. There are times when I think of him. There are times when I miss him. I miss our conversations. I miss his droll, his dry sense of humor. He, like me, had a tendency to overstate or understate. But I don't miss sharing my life experiences with him because I do it every day. I know he is living right now through me.

Now you may think this is stupid, a defense mechanism against the pain of grief and loss, a psychotic defense against the terrifying reality of death. You might be right, but you might not be. I don't have the feeling that I have all this pain stored up inside me and that this is a way of protecting myself against it. I am also not particularly afraid of death. I have a feeling that what I experienced along that trail in Nepal, that peak experience, put me in touch with a deeper reality in life. And I think this is what Jesus meant when he told Mary and the disciples that soon he would no longer be with them, but then he would once again be with them.

What we are talking about here is incarnation. I don't know where my dad is right now. I don't know where we go after we die, or even if the word "where" makes any sense. I am pretty sure that he does not have a body, since his body was cremated. What I do know is that my dad lives on, is incarnated, in-carne, embodied in me.

I wonder if this is what God's incarnation in Jesus was all about. I don't know where or in what form God is, or even if the words "where" and "form" make any sense. If God is spirit, as Jesus told us, then I have a hunch that God doesn't have a body. So, creation, *all of creation* must be God's body. God sees, hears, feels, and experiences through us, through all sentient beings. This is why all sentient beings are holy, a spark of the divine, an incarnation of the Spirit of God.

Rocks are holy, too. The rock on my desk next to my computer as I write this is not only a creation but a self-expression, an incarnation of God. This rock can eventually

dissolve, turn into dirt, become part of a plant, and perhaps even become a part of an animal or a human. This is one way of looking at it. Another way of looking at it is the realization that this little rock is already connected to everything, is already everything. Admittedly, it is a little more difficult for me to wrap my mind around God's incarnating in a rock than in a human being. I know I have more work to do in this area. Hopefully someday I will get there.

If this is true, and I believe it is, then we are *all* incarnations of God. We are not only God's hands, the means through which God brings healing to the world; we are also God's eyes and ears. What we see and hear, what we think and feel goes straight from our hearts to God. Think about it. This is why God became incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus, God learned what it feels like to live in the world of space and time, to be a sentient being, to be a human being, to experience joy, and also to suffer and die. He also learned what it feels like to love. Perhaps this was the greatest, the most important lesson that God learned from incarnating in that little baby, in Jesus of Nazareth, 2000 years ago—to learn what it feels like to love.

If this is true, and I believe it is, this means that we are *all* incarnations of that great Spirit in the world of space and time, whether we are male or female, white or black, homosexual or heterosexual or bisexual or trans, animal or human. If we could see each other as incarnations of God, we might be more disturbed by all the suffering in the world. It might bother us that children in sub-Saharan Africa are dying of starvation or that Native Americans on a bleak and impoverished piece of land called a reservation suffer from the highest rate of poverty, alcoholism, school dropout, teenage pregnancy, and unemployment of any ethnic or racial group in America. It might bother us when people suffer from prejudice or discrimination, when Black people know from their own experience that their lives do not matter. Remember, when we do it to one of the least of these, we do it to Jesus; we do it to God.

Think about the implications of the post-resurrection experiences in terms of incarnation. Think of yourself as a precious incarnation of God and see how this will change your feelings about yourself. Consider the possibility that God is living in our world of space and time through you, that God not only sees what you see; everything you think and feel registers with God. This is why it is not a good idea to cling to resentments, to give in to our victim complex, to indulge in anger, in selfishness, to allow our heart to become cold and hard.

Finally, and this is back to our original point, think of your loved one or loved ones. It is true; you have lost them in one form, a human form, just as Mary and the disciples lost Jesus. If you open your eyes and your heart, however, you may not only

discover them in new and different ways in the world; you might actually experience them living in the world through you, delighting in your experiences, continuing to share in your life. This was the experience I had on my trek through the foothills of the Himalayas in northwest Nepal.

I am sorry that, because of the pandemic, we can't be together to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion, especially during this Easter season. However, we can in our imagination. If we approach this sacrament in an attitude of faith, we may actually experience our Lord Jesus Christ as present, as incarnate in the bread and the cup. If we see with our heart, we may see, we may experience him in these elements. Then we may be able to realize that just as we take these elements into our bodies, where they are transformed into or become a part of us, so also our Lord lives not only in us but through us.

This is what incarnation is all about, an experience of Spirit, of the "other side" in the realm of space and time. And this experience, this realization is what transformed the disciples into apostles after the death of their Lord and their rediscovery of his presence as the Holy Spirit both within and among them. What happened to them can also happen to us. We can discover that we are God's temple, and that God lives in the world through us.

As we journey forth as twenty-first century disciples, God grant that the light that God has planted within our soul will never go out, and that we will find ways to share this precious light with a broken and darkened world.