

YOU ARE GOD'S TEMPLE!
The Seventh Sunday of Easter

(05/29/2022)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 3:10-17
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)

“And He departed from our sight that we might return to our heart, and there find Him. For He departed and behold, He is here.” (Saint Augustine)

The Easter season, the fifty days between Easter and Pentecost, is a time that we set aside to reflect on what happened to Jesus following his crucifixion. On Easter Sunday we focus on the miracle and mystery of his resurrection, on the empty tomb. In the seven weeks that follow, we focus on the post-resurrection encounters, the disciples’ experiences of meeting their risen Lord in several different places and even forms.

We do this not only to help us understand what the disciples experienced following Jesus’ death and resurrection, but also to help us understand the existential themes of death, life after death, and heaven as they apply to us and to our loved ones who have passed on. Since this weekend is also Memorial Day weekend, a time when we honor not only those members of our armed forces that have given their lives in the service of their country, but also loved ones who are no longer with us, we will continue to explore this theme of the relationship of life and death not only to help us with our grieving, but also to help us understand our relationship with God.

Throughout this Easter season, our reflections have been guided by two quotes. The first, which I mentioned last week, is by Saint Augustine. Regarding Jesus’ death, resurrection, ascension, and the disciples’ experience of their risen Lord as the Holy Spirit, Augustine says,

*And He departed from our sight that we might return to our heart, and there find Him.
For He departed and behold, He is here.*

The second is taken from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Paul says,

Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s spirit dwells in you?

You are God’s temple, and the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Jesus, dwells in you! If you are looking for Jesus, you don’t have to look very far. You can start within your heart!

To be perfectly honest, I must admit that this second quote was not one of the two guiding lights of my reflections *throughout* this Easter season. I was reminded of it by a tee-shirt

that Darlene and I saw displayed in the window of a store in Provincetown last week. The tee-shirt which caught my fancy, read as follows:

My body is a temple.

Old, dilapidated, crumbling, falling apart.

Probably haunted; perhaps even cursed.

I think for most of us, as we glide gracefully or semi-gracefully into our senior years, this captures how we feel more days than not! But that's not the point.

To reiterate, when Mary Magdalene experiences the risen Christ by the tomb, she realizes that she needs to let go of the human form of Jesus to rediscover him in a new way. In his last days with his disciples, Jesus tells them that it is to their advantage that he die. If he does not die, his disciples will continue to "have him" in human form, but because they have him in this form, they will never be able to discover or experience him in a new way, as the risen Christ, as the Holy Spirit within them.

As we have noted, Jesus' conversations with Mary and the disciples echo the Buddhist teaching, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." They call us to consider the deeper meaning of death. From a physical perspective, death appears to be the end, the cessation of life. Jesus and the Buddha tell us that death is not the cessation of life, but rather the dissolution of the physical form of life. They assure us that death can be an agent of transformation. Death can lead to resurrection, rebirth, to incarnation in a new and different form.

This statement of faith is also a 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 the velocity of light squared, Antoine Lavoisier recognized the role that oxygen plays in combustion. In this discovery, Lavoisier disproved the prevailing phlogiston theory, which held that materials that burned did so because they contained various amounts of a mystical substance, phlogiston.

By the way, this past week a friend of mine, a scientist and toxicologist, suggested that the discredited phlogiston theory might have some merit; she suggested that the substance that enables materials to burn is not phlogiston, but carbon. This made me happy since, for some reason, I have loved the phlogiston theory since I first encountered it in high school chemistry. However, neither of knew what to do about sodium, which bursts into flame in either water or air. I have a hunch that when this happens, it is because of oxidation from either the water or the moisture in the air. So I guess Lavoisier was right!

But that's not the point. In 1789 Lavoisier formulated the Law of the Conservation of Matter and Energy. Unfortunately, Lavoisier, who became known as the father of modern chemistry, did not live a long and fruitful life. A French nobleman who had the misfortune of living at the time of the French Revolution, 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 it could be true of us. Nothing is ever lost! It can, however, change form. 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 our life.

This morning, I would like to share an experience that I had in the summer of 1999 during my first trekking pilgrimage through India, Nepal, and Tibet. After I returned, I preached a series of sermons on lessons I learned from my Tibetan pilgrimage. What I am sharing with you today was part of what I shared at that time. However, I venture to say that not many of you reading or listening to this now were in church that Sunday in the fall of 1999, and the few of you who were, now being of advanced age and perhaps even slowly descending into your dotage, have long ago forgotten what I said. Please understand; I am not throwing stones here; I can watch "Monk," "Murder, She Wrote," and Hallmark murder mystery repeats and fail to remember who committed the crime, though I watched the show only a month 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 remember what I said, I think you would like to hear the story again! However, whereas I previously shared the story in the context of grieving, this morning I would like us to focus on our relationship with God and the possibility that you and I may be an incarnation of God's creative spirit.

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. 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 held 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. As a teenager, he found he could make a good deal of money 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 refused the offer of a full scholarship to Brown University if he would pitch on their baseball team because he thought going to college 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, he couldn't get enough information on 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 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 and feeling! It was like he was there with and for that little child.

In the summer of 1999 my 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 over 18,000 feet above sea level 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 six years earlier, on the date of Darlene's and my anniversary in 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 raising animals and growing barley on the terraced sides of the foothills.

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 gear? They knew that we had something they didn't have. I guess you could categorize them 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, I was dumbfounded and overwhelmed with emotion! The most important thing in these children's lives was not material possessions, 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 I wrote out the English alphabet for them, sang the alphabet song to them, and then gave them the pen and paper so they could practice 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 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! I have never cried so much or so deeply in my life. Corey, and everyone else in my trekking group were stunned. Apparently, the 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*.)

At first, I thought that this outpouring of emotion was an expression of how deeply touched 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, take up residence for a year or two in the Tibetan Buddhist monastery where we had spent the previous night, learn Tibetan, learn more 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, and I suspected that my wife wouldn't be wild about it. In any event, I quickly realized that my tears had little to do with the plight of these little children.

My second thought about 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.

Suddenly 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 may explain 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 sense of humor. He, like me, had a more than marginal propensity 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 in and 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, what Maslow would call a 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, 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 must be God's body!* God sees, hears, feels, and experiences through us, through all sentient beings. If this is true, then all sentient beings are holy, sparks of the divine, incarnations of the Spirit of God!

If this is true, and I believe it is, then 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! God became incarnate 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. He learned what it feels like to experience joy; he also learned what it feels like to suffer and die. I suspect that, perhaps most importantly, God 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 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 God 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. Like Jesus, we are all temples of God's spirit. 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 temple of God, 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 everything you think and feel registers with God. This is why it is not a good idea to cling to resentments, to indulge in anger, to be selfish, 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 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.

This is what incarnation is all about, an experience of Spirit in the realm of space and time. And this experience, this realization that we are all temples of God's creative, loving, healing spirit 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.

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