

THE DEAD ARE INVISIBLE TO US
(They are not absent)

(04/30/2023)

Scripture Lesson: John 20:11-18 (King James Version)

“Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.” (John 20:17)

“The dead are invisible to us; they are not absent.” (St. Augustine)

Following my sermon last week, several people expressed their interest in something I said. I don't want to get into a debate about exactly how many people expressed their interest; a conservative estimate would peg it at less than two hundred. But that's not the point. The point was a thought-provoking quote from Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo.

Augustine lived from 354-430 CE. As bishop of Hippo, which is now Algeria in northern Africa, Augustine was the most significant Christian theologian after St. Paul. In his autobiographical *Confessions* and his more mature theological work *The City of God*, Augustine laid the foundation for medieval and modern Christian thought.

Only a few weeks ago, I ran across the quote I used in last week's sermon. Augustine said, “The dead are invisible to us; they are not absent.” I believe what Augustine said is true. It was true of the disciples' experience of their risen Lord following his resurrection, and it is also true of our relationship with our loved ones who have died, who have entered into what Episcopalians beautifully call “the nearer presence of God.”

Today I would like to share an example with you. It has to do with a dream, actually with a series of dreams. First, I would like to note the role that dreams play in the Judaism and Christianity, where they have traditionally been understood as encounters with God, as religious experiences.

There are many instances or examples of dreams in the Bible. For example, in the Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures), we find the following:

Genesis 15	Abram's (Abraham's) dream
Genesis 20	Abimelech's dream
Genesis 28	Jacob's dream at Bethel
Genesis 37	Joseph's adolescent dreams
Genesis 40	Joseph interprets the dreams of the two prisoners
Genesis 41	Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams
Daniel 2	Nebuchadnezzar's first dream
Daniel 4-5	Nebuchadnezzar's second dream

In the New Testament (the Christian Scriptures), we find the following:

Matthew 1:20	Joseph's dream not to divorce Mary
Matthew 2:12	The wise men's warning dream
Matthew 2:13	Joseph is told in a dream to flee to Egypt
Matthew 2:19	Joseph is told in a dream to return to Israel
Matthew 2:22	Joseph is warned in a dream not to go to Judea
Acts 18:8	Paul's reassuring "vision of the night"

The Protestant minister and Jungian psychoanalyst John Sanford, in his book entitled, *Dreams—God's Forgotten Language*, cites examples how highly dreams were regarded by the theologians and leaders of the early church. Sanford invites us to look at our own dreams as messages from God, guidelines to our individuation, God's unfolding of our lives.

Approximately fifty years ago, when I was the Protestant Chaplain of Foxborough State Hospital, I had an interesting conversation with one of the patients.

Following our Sunday morning worship service, which was held in a beautiful little chapel in the admissions building, the building where I had my office, one of the patients asked if she could speak with me about something that was important to her. We went to my office where we could talk in private.

I knew quite a bit about the woman, whom I had visited a couple of times on the admissions ward. I had also attended a staff meeting when her case had been discussed. She was an attractive, well-dressed young woman in her mid to late twenties who had been admitted to our hospital a month or so earlier for a serious suicide attempt. She was obviously intelligent and articulate. She seemed coherent and in touch with reality. She had attended our Sunday morning worship services every Sunday for the past month.

The woman noted that in one of my little Sunday morning homilies I had mentioned that in the Judeo-Christian tradition, dreams were regarded as messages from God. She said that she would like to talk with me about her dreams, in particular, a series of dreams, and she hoped I could help her understand them.

The patient was suffering from severe childhood and adolescent trauma. Her parents should not have been parents—however, they did manage to produce a lovely, sensitive young woman who, unfortunately, was severely wounded by their verbal, emotional, and physical abuse. Periodically, the young woman's depression would get the better of her. Her self-image was so poor, it was easy for her to conclude that the world would be better off without her. And death seemed to be the only way she could escape the deep inner pain that she felt.

So far, all her suicidal attempts, and there had been eight or ten, had been caught in time. I thought that this was because a part of her, admittedly a small part of her, really didn't want to die. I thought she was laboring under what could be called "the concretistic fallacy." Something

in her, in her psyche, in her way of thinking about herself and life did need to die so new life could emerge, but her body wasn't the problem. To kill the body would be to commit the concretistic fallacy, to miss the point.

The young woman told me that when she was deeply depressed, beaten down by life and her inner pain, her grandfather would appear to her in a dream. As far as I could determine, her grandfather was the only positive adult figure in her life. She had had a couple of teachers who were empathetic and who validated her potential. They went out of their way to be supportive, but she was only with them for one school year; then they were gone. Her grandfather was the only constant positive figure in her life.

When she was depressed and was experiencing suicidal ideation, her grandfather, who had died when the young woman was in high school, would come to her in a dream. He would tell her that he loved her, that he believed in her, that he knew she was struggling, but he knew she could work her way through it. He told her that she was a special person, that God loved her, and that God wanted her to do something special with her life. He said he would always be here for her, and that he would help her resist the urge to hurt herself.

The woman asked me what I thought about those dreams. She had just had one of them a couple of days prior to our conversation. I told her I thought they were absolutely beautiful dreams! She then asked me if I could explain to her how dreams work, where they come from, and how we could understand them from a psychological point of view.

Nothing like a Sunday morning challenge! However, I had read a lot of books, had spent literally thousands of dollars on tuition, and I felt I was up to the task!

I told her that Sigmund Freud believed that dreams were basically a hallucinatory wish-fulfillment. She wishes that her grandfather were still alive so she could be with him, could talk with him, but he isn't. So, the dream presents him to her as alive, and in the dream, he tells her what she would have liked him to say to her in person. I then told her that I thought this was a relatively superficial interpretation of such a powerful series of dreams.

I told her that a second interpretation would be the way an internal family systems therapist might understand the dreams. Just as she had introjected, had internalized the bad messages that her parents had given her, messages about what a stupid, worthless, bad child she was, messages that still lived inside her, she had also internalized the positive message that her grandfather had given her. The messages from her grandfather were now a part of her internal family system; they lived within her as well as the other voices; and they would emerge whenever she needed to "hear" them.

I then told her that a third way of understanding the dreams would be grounded in depth psychology. She obviously had what Adler would call an inferiority complex. Adler would say

that the positive, supportive message of the dreams are compensating for her low self-esteem. Jung would add that the Self, the center of the collective unconscious provides us with the messages we need to heal, to be made whole. This is why the messages, which come from the one positive masculine figure in her life, carry an archetypal energy; they are the activation of something positive and healing that is deep inside her. Her grandfather could be a positive animus figure for her, or perhaps the personification of the Wise Old Man archetype, the archetype of the healer. I told her that no matter how she understands the dreams, where they come from, and the role they play in her healing, a loving, supportive message from a “person” she can trust (and there weren’t many of them in her life) is exactly what she needs to hear when she finds herself stuck in one of her “dark” places.

I have to admit; I felt I did a good job of answering her question. As we know, some people regard dreams as nothing more than the psyche downloading junk from the previous day, a rerun of the last television show we watched the previous night, or a psychic reaction to the pepperoni pizza we ate for supper. Throughout history, however, and in many different cultures, dreams have been taken much more seriously. I felt I was able to help validate her dreams by helping her to understand different ways that she might view them.

Then came the kicker! The young woman thanked me but said that that was not her problem. She knew the dreams were playing a positive role in her healing, in activating a will to live when she was finding it difficult to go on. What confused and troubled her was the ending to each of the dreams.

I asked her how the dreams ended. She said that at the end of every dream, after her grandfather had been with her, had talked with her, had reassured her, had given her a sense that her life was worthwhile, had strengthened her desire to go on living, to not give up, she invariably reached out to him to hug him. When she did, her grandfather would step back; he would not let her hug him, nor would he hug her. This confused her and hurt her feelings. Then he would say to her, “You can’t touch me. It is not your time.” Then the dream would fade, and her grandfather would disappear.

The young woman told me that she was confused and troubled and sad at how the dreams ended. She wanted to know why her grandfather wouldn’t touch her, wouldn’t hug her. She had loved his hugs when she was a little girl. Now, when she needed his hugs, his warm embrace more than ever, he kept her at arm’s length. The dreams ended with her crying, feeling sad and alone.

I was stunned. The grandfather’s reaction at the end of each dream didn’t fit any of the theories I knew about dreams and their interpretation. It wasn’t congruent with the rest of what he said to her. It had the effect of undermining or diminishing the positive, healing, comforting message and experience of the dream.

Then, possibly because I was a minister and the Protestant Chaplain to the hospital, I thought of Jesus, his conversation with Mary Magdalene by the tomb on what we now call Easter Sunday. As we noted last week, there are several translations of what Jesus said to her that morning. In some he says, “Do not cling to me;” in others he says, “Do not hold me.” However, in the King James version, Jesus tells Mary, “Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.”

Last week, I raised a couple of questions in relation to the King James translation of this passage. I wonder if, while standing by the tomb, Mary had touched Jesus, had hugged him as she probably wanted to do, it would have done something to Jesus. Or, perhaps, it would have done something to Mary. It seemed out of character for Jesus to tell Mary, with whom he had a very close, loving relationship, not to touch him, not to hug him, not to take his hand, not to hold him.

Getting back to my conversation with the young woman, I told her that we should gently set aside all my clever psychological interpretations of the dream. I told her that the dream was probably what we could call a visitation. Her grandfather, who had passed from this life, was taking advantage of her openness to the “other side” in her sleep, in her dreams, to be with her, to comfort her, to remind her that God loved her, that she was a special, a beautiful person, and she was meant to do something special with her life. I told her that his refusal to take her hand, to hug her, to let her hug him, was not a rejection of her. He was not pushing her away. It was an act of love.

Her grandfather may have been telling her that if she touched him or if he touched her, she would pass on to the “other side.” And that will, indeed, happen—someday. Just not now. As her grandfather told her, “It is not your time.” This is the time for her to live, to live in this crazy world of space and time, this world of pleasure and pain, this world of joy and sadness, health and sickness, sanity and insanity. I told her that when the time came, which I certainly hoped would be many, many years from now, her grandfather would be there to take her hand and walk her over to the “other side,” to what our Episcopalian sisters and brothers refer to as “the nearer presence of God.”

By the way, this is a true story. It really happened. The woman found what I said about a visitation by her grandfather to be comforting. My ability to recall what Jesus said to Mary at the tomb enabled me to see deeper than the psychological theories that, at times, can be so helpful. It reaffirmed what we find so often in the Bible, that dreams are religious experiences. As John Sanford has said, dreams are “God’s forgotten language.”

For the past few weeks, we have been talking about the disciples’ post-resurrection encounters with Jesus. These encounters, which only the disciples experienced, were expressions of a deep love that they had for Jesus and the special role that he had played in their lives. The young woman’s encounters with her grandfather were also expressions of a deep love

that they shared, and the special role that her grandfather had played in her life. Both the disciples' encounters with Jesus following his death and the young woman's encounters with her grandfather, who had passed on, remind us that the wall between this world and the next is not as high or impenetrable as we might think. They remind us that the distance between this world and the next, between earth and heaven, between the realm of space and time and the realm of eternity, is not as great as we might think.

God is nearer to us than we might think! Jesus is nearer to us than we might think! If our hearts and our minds are open and receptive, as they are in worship, in prayer, in meditation, and when we are dreaming, the gap between this world and the next can disappear. And this is true of our ongoing relationship with our loved ones who have passed on as well. They are nearer to us than we know!

This brief encounter that I had with the young woman in a state mental hospital fifty years ago is a reminder that the love of God, which was incarnated for this young woman in the person or form of her grandfather, is always present to us. It is a reminder of how important it is for us to live this life, this crazy, confusing life to the fullest, for this life is God's gift to us. It is also a reminder that some of the special people in our lives, people who love us or care for us, may be God's way of reaching out to us.

As St. Augustine said so many years ago, "The dead are invisible to us; they are not absent." It is very possible that it really was her grandfather who visited this young woman in her dreams. It also could have been an angel who appeared to her in the form of her grandfather. It probably doesn't make much difference. As we know, angels are heavenly beings who mediate between God and us. As Pope Pius XII once said, "the world should be more conscious of the presence of angels." I believe that is absolutely true!

And finally, the woman's dreams can be a reminder that when the time comes, when our time comes, God, in one form or another, will be there to take us by the hand.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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(An audio version of this sermon will be available on our church website later this week.)