

God Gets Personal
A Sermon for the Feast of The Holy Trinity, Sunday, May 30th, 2010
Proverbs 8, Romans 5:1-5, and John 16:12-15

“Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.”

“I still have many things to say to you. . . .” Not exactly good news for a congregation gathered on a beautiful spring Sunday, eager to get on with the Memorial Day weekend. How can it possibly be that, after all these Sundays in the same sanctuary, after some six hundred sermons from the same pulpit, “I still have many things to say to you. . . .” To be honest with you, I consider it nothing short of a miracle that after all these years and all those sermons some of you are still showing up. It is perfectly understandable, given our infatuation with novelty (Americans have been called “neophyles” by Europeans—lovers of the new), given our severely truncated attention spans, and our orientation toward the visual rather than the aural, it is perfectly understandable that, after listening to the same individual drone on for so long, we should have difficulty hearing anything at all on a Sunday morning even if we wanted or expected to hear something.

So, it doesn’t offend me anymore that some of you routinely dose off, visit with somebody, read the announcements, walk out the front door, practically before a word is out of my mouth. I understand. It is perfectly understandable—unless, of course, you came hoping to hear the Lord Jesus say something to you, to hear a word from the heavenly Father spoken through the power of the Holy Spirit. If that’s the case, then it’s practically impossible to understand why we would do such things. But then, like the rest of the world, maybe you’ve given up on God having anything to say to you. Or maybe this isn’t the place where God speaks to you anymore. Maybe you like better what the Lord of creation has to say to you at the beach, or the restaurant, or the bike path, or the cemetery, or a drive in the country, or even at work. That’s fair enough, you know. Surely God is saying something to you in all those places, but it won’t be the same as what God is saying to you here at the font, pulpit and table.

Let’s face it, there is something to be said for the itinerant, moving, dynamic nature of Jesus’ preaching, teaching and healing; he never stays very long in one place. And the same is true for the witness of the apostles. Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Timothy and the others are continually on the move. So, what’s a “stay at home” preacher to do except to ask you as does Jesus and the prophets, “Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?”

“Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” Jesus challenges us with his parables. Believe it or not, there is still more to come, and there is still more to be said, Jesus assures us. After three troubled years with Jesus, one very long Sermon on the Mount, a shorter but long Sermon on the Plain, a sermon here, a sermon there, here a sermon, there a sermon, everywhere a sermon, Jesus tells his disciples, “Hey, I still have much more to say to you. . . . [And] When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak *whatever he hears*, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.” There is more to come. There is more to be said. There is more to your story. There is more for you than past failures in your life. There is more for you than your present fears. And I know some of you today are having a very hard time believing that the Father or our risen Lord Jesus has anymore to offer you through the guidance of his Holy Spirit. You’ve been struggling with ill health for a very long time. It’s been months since the severance package and health insurance ran out. Sometimes you feel so blue, so down in the dumps, you can hardly slog your way through another day. You wake up, and it’s just a slew of worries, day in and day out. You come to church, and it’s just the same old thing, Sunday after Sunday. But to be perfectly honest, some of you seem to be just fine with the same old

thing—the same old liturgy, the same old anthems, the same old readings, the same old sanctuary, because the “same old” is a lot easier than change, a lot easier than “I still have many things to say to you. . . .” But some of us here want to know—need desperately to know—what is this “much more” that Jesus has to say to us? Many of us are waiting, wondering.

According to the calendar of the Church, these weeks after Pentecost are called “ordinary time,” translated, “the same old thing.” This could be the season of “the same old thing.” You’re likely to get very tired of seeing green in the chancel before the end of November. The holy days have past. Lenten disciplines are long gone. Easter lilies have faded. And the Day of Pentecost is now past. About all that is left for the church, it would seem, is what I call the season of summer slump. I can hardly wait for it to heat up in here! But we hear today that the “much more” that Jesus promises is sometimes experienced in the “much less” of our lives. Less can be more. It is sometimes during the ordinary time of our lives—the summer slumps—when every day seems to offer more of the same, when you don’t get what you want, when your hopes remain unfulfilled, it is often during these ordinary times that God gives you something unexpected. The “much more” that Jesus promises is sometimes experienced in the “much less” of our lives.

I think of the spiritual journey of a friend that led him from the Catholic Church in Puerto Rico, to the Lutheran seminary in Chicago, and finally, the last I knew of him, to a Quaker meeting house in Hyde Park. Now, I call that moving from “much more” to “much less,” but he didn’t see it that way. My friend, who was a pretty ordinary kind of guy, explained to me that in Quaker spirituality the ordinary takes center stage. Less is definitely more. With no creed, no liturgy, no sanctuary, no holy days, no sacraments, no clergy, practically no nothing, Quaker simplicity revolves around silence. When you go to the meeting house, you go there to sit in silence with others. You go there to listen for what the Spirit has to say. If the Spirit has nothing to say, then no one speaks, and everybody goes home.

“For God alone my soul waits in silence,” prays the psalmist, “from him comes my salvation. . . . For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.”

“Be still, and know that I am God.”

We often complain about God’s distance, but in the Bible, God really gets very personal. We often lament God’s silence, yet in Scripture, God is persistently speaking to us. “Thus says the LORD . . .” is the prophets’ refrain. “And God said, ‘Let there be light’” “So sayeth the LORD. . . .” And Jesus says, even beyond Scripture, “I still have many things to say to you. . . .” So, maybe the problem isn’t God’s silence, maybe the problem isn’t God’s distance, but rather the problem may be our inability to listen or our unwillingness to pay attention.

“He sees many things,” Isaiah observes, “but does not observe them; his ears are open, but he doesn’t hear.” Well, how can we? How can we see or hear when there is so much to fill our eyes and our ears? How can we be capable of hearing or seeing or sensing or praying? We live in a world that blinds us and deafens us by its infinite demands upon our attention. How can we see when images ceaselessly flash before our eyes? How can we hear when there is constantly noise filling our ears? So, I wonder if one of the greatest challenges before Christians in our age is the challenge to be still enough, silent enough, to listen to what God has to say.

“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears” You see, even the Spirit listens in order to speak. And often that Spirit speaks as to Elijah in “a still, small voice,” and as we heard last Sunday from Paul in Romans, with “sighs too deep for words.” My question is how are you going to hear such a voice when there is always noise and confusion around you?

“Lo, I am with you always,” Jesus promises us at the end of Matthew’s Gospel. He’s going to

keep speaking whether we listen or not, just as the flowers will keep blossoming whether we notice them or not. St. Augustine spoke of this “plentitude” of God in a passage from *The City of God* where he mentions how God created all of the flowers in the world. We might have stopped creating flowers after one or two beautiful specimens, Augustine says, but God did not stop, God kept creating multitudes of flowers, all in different shapes and colors and kinds. Not only are they beautiful, he said, but note the glory of how they will turn their heads toward the sun, bending towards the light. He says that we might have been content, as humans, with just a few flowers and their beauty, but God did not stop with a few, because God is overflowing with love and creativity and plentitude.

The Psalmist today reminds us that the God whose majesty extends throughout the universe is the same God who silences the mighty with songs of babes. Paul urges the church at Rome to face suffering with joy instead of despair, for nothing can separate them from the love that God has lavished on them. And they have every reason to believe that their hope will not disappoint them.

When we speak the name, “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” we are confessing that God is love. And if God is love, and love is never alone, then God cannot be alone, but only in relationship to another. Some days God comes as judge walking through our lives and exposing all the messes we have made. Other days God comes as a shepherd fending off our enemies, and feeding us by his hand, and searching for us. Some days God comes as a whirlwind who blows all our certainties away. Other days God comes as a brooding hen who hides us in the shelter of her wings. And some days God comes to agonize with us in silence on the cross. And other days God comes to raise us up with Jesus. If we were to name all the ways that God keeps on speaking to us the list would go on forever. Thus the chorus of the church on earth, all creation and the host of heaven, singing, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.”