

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Stefanie Taylor
Gospel Reading: John 17:1-11
28 May, 2017



Today's gospel begins by saying that Jesus was addressing heaven so I decided to look at other places where Jesus mentions heaven to better orient myself to today's text. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is among us but that verse is so familiar to me that it's kind of lost its meaning. Sometimes when I hear a verse like that that is so familiar I need to hear it a different way. So I looked to the gospel of Thomas for new language. Thomas says it a little differently. He says, "The Kingdom is inside you, and outside you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will realize it is you who are the sons of the living Father."

Now compare that to today's gospel where Jesus says "this is eternal life, that they may know you." There seems to be a message about God that was emerging during that time: that to know and be known is what it's all about. Jesus goes on to say that he is no longer in the world and is going to God. He then makes the point that we are still in the world and his prayer is that we be made one, just as he is one with God. So we are led to believe from today's gospel that eternal life is about knowing God and knowing leads to union with God and union with God is heaven.

Teilhard de Chardin says in his book, "Heart of the Matter" that because the kingdom of heaven cannot be found simply on Earth but rather through union with God that it requires the death of our ego. He talks about how hard it is to allow yourself to disappear in order to merge with the whole. But he has this beautiful way of connecting that with the Eucharist. He says, "That is why, pouring into my chalice the bitterness of all separations, of all limitations, and of all sterile fallings away, you then hold it out to me, 'Drink ye all of this.'" In other words, everything that we are able to give up, we receive back in the communion we have with each other.

In today's gospel, set right before Jesus died on the cross, we are reminded that death is not about disappearing, but rather, the emptying of the self in order to be open enough to receive everything else that is... culminating in unity.

But allowing the self to get smaller and smaller in favor of wholeness is hard. It's especially hard if one is doing this work while using the same language over and over again for guidance. I'll tell you what I mean:

A few years ago I was in a spiritual growth spurt and was feeling a little unsteady about what I believed. I either read or someone told me, I can't remember which, that if I wanted to know what I believed, I needed to pay attention to my prayers. At that time, my prayers were pretty rigid, formulaic, and unchanging. Essentially, I was using the same language I had always used to pray. So it was easy to examine my prayers.

This examination resulted in the knowledge that I had a lot of secretly held beliefs—secret even from myself. The first was that I believed that the world was bad and that terrible things happen all the time. Second, I believed that God put me here to experience these terrible things and then to learn something from them. Because of that, all my prayers were sort of half pleas to God to allow me to learn without having to face tragedy.

All Saints' Episcopal Church
634 West Peachtree Street NW • Atlanta, Georgia 30308
Telephone 404-881-0835 • Facsimile 404-881-3796
www.allsaintsatlanta.org

But I also discovered through examining my prayers that I didn't really believe God would intervene and so I was kind of just waiting for the terrible things to start happening. Examining my prayers showed me that I believed God was loving but hands off, that life was supposed to be terrible and if it wasn't, I was wasting my life on Earth, and that the only real reason I prayed at all was a half hearted attempt at getting God to spare me pain. In my defense, I also prayed for God to spare everyone else but that was basically the gist—please keep this terrible world at bay and let me still learn the lesson I'm supposed to learn.

But prayer is not just the reflection of our beliefs about God and our faith journey—our identities inhabit them, shape them, and, if we aren't careful, become the way our ego converses with the God of its own design. I think that was what I was uncovering in my prayer, a left turn of sorts that left my soul feeling unmoored unless I clung to the containers of my faith that if I were being more honest had long since grown too small, too narrow. The nail in the coffin came a little later from a conversation with one of my students. If you really want a spiritual humbling, by the way, find a sixth grader and ask them about God. I dare you! There's prophecy in them hills.

I'm actually being serious. A little bit ago I was teaching in my sixth grade Old Testament class. It's my favorite class to teach because it gives us roots as Christians. It tell us who we are and where we came from. With strong roots, one has the ability to explore a little more freely. So there I was, laying this foundation of common identity when a young man raised his hand and said, "that doesn't even make any sense, I think we need to throw it away and start all over."

To which I responded, "it may have happened 4,000 years ago but I don't think we need to just throw it out—it tells us who we are, it's like our family album! You don't just throw your family album away because you don't look like that anymore do you?" And he said, "sure, I get it. But don't you think some things have happened since then? I mean, don't you think it's time for a new story?" And something about the truth in his statement stopped me from arguing with him.

The truth that hit me was that I was allowing the story to give me a concrete identity and I was allowing that identity to strengthen my ego, not provide a foundation so that I could go deeper. In other words, I allowed the living word of scripture to grow stale by not providing fresh language to reveal the truth from within. I was using the creeds and the common prayer and the same linear explanations of scripture as a clutch for spiritual development. I was not using these things to anchor me; I was using them to restrain me. I was twisting them, in my humanness, to remain something fixed and without meaning so that I didn't have to do any actual work. So that I didn't have to listen for the Holy Spirit or answer hard questions or face scary periods of doubt.

Basically, my ego taugh itself because I wasn't growing and my spiritual development wasn't strong enough to let my ego know that it wasn't dying, it was merging and therefore gaining all that there is to gain. And yet here I was, teaching young people the same rote information without any direction about how to do the work around it. I was giving them answers and Jesus pretty clearly modeled that answering directly is useless. Answers feed the ego, they don't allow the ego to relax and let go in the presence of truth and never-failing love.

A few weeks ago my four year old son told me he hated communion. I said, "well you have to go, it's important." He said, "why?" I said, "because God is in the bread and the wine and there is something mysterious and wonderful and powerful that happens when we merge our body with His." To which my son replied, "but I don't see him in the bread." And I said, "you can't see him, he's invisible." And he said, "God's not invisible! God's not a ghost!" And I said, "you're right, God's not a ghost, God's alive and some people can see God better than others. So you need keep going to communion baby, I believe it will help." And he said simply, "Ok." Because for a four year old, trusting the

All Saints' Episcopal Church

634 West Peachtree Street NW • Atlanta, Georgia 30308

Telephone 404-881-0835 • Facsimile 404-881-3796

www.allsaintsatlanta.org

experience is enough. He didn't need to know anymore. In fact, he corrected me when my answer didn't contain truth.

God is not invisible and God is not dead and God is not hands-off. But I've learned that that was never the point anyway. The point was not to find the opposite of the God I had created in my head and that would somehow be the true God. The point is that God is and that God is in me and that God is in all. The point is that I needed to go deeper into what is. In fact, I learned that maybe all those scary things aren't there to conquer or control but to look at and say, "I'm not afraid." I imagine that Jesus is familiar with this tendency to want to hold on tight when things are shifting and new paradigms emerge in our lives. The fact that growing causes fear does not have to hinder the growth. In fact, fear can just be the signal that God is closer than ever. And instead of trying to protect myself by separating myself, I've learned it's OK to step into the dark. It's OK to merge.

The gospel for today is imploring us to share in the oneness of God. To be in communion with all that was and is and is to come. This requires us to be present, to be open, and to recognize spiritual stagnation when it's happening and to step into the scary places in order to get moving again. Because the ego is scared of disappearing and that's a natural fear. But the truth is that disappearing was never on the table, to be known is what is on the table. The challenge for today is to give the ego permission to lay down its walls around our hearts so that we can see and be seen. The next time I'm feeling nostalgic and longing for solid ground and something recognizable, I'm going to breathe deep and say, "hello God, I'm listening."

All Saints' Episcopal Church

634 West Peachtree Street NW • Atlanta, Georgia 30308

Telephone 404-881-0835 • Facsimile 404-881-3796

www.allsaintsatlanta.org