

ABOUT AS CLOSE TO GOD AS YOU CAN GET

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

November 5, 2006

Scripture: Psalm 146; Mark 12: 28-34

All Saints Sunday

Sometimes our dreams, inexplicable as they are, tell us more about ourselves than our waking thoughts reveal. Marie Howe, who teaches at Sarah Lawrence, and Columbia, and NYU has written a poem that catches something of this. It's entitled "The Promise." It chronicles a dream she had about her brother John who died of AIDS a few years ago.

In the dream I had when he came back not sick
but whole, and wearing his winter coat,

he looked at me as though he couldn't speak, as if
there were a law against it, a membrane he couldn't break.

His silence was what he could not
not do, like our breathing in this world, like our living,

as we do, in time.

And I told him: I'm reading all this Buddhist stuff,

and listen, we don't die when we die. Death is an event,
a threshold we pass through. We go on and on

and into light forever.

And he looked down, and then back up at me. It was the look we'd pass

across the kitchen table when Dad was drunk again and dangerous,
the level look that wants to tell you something,

in a crowded room, something important, and can't.¹

I suppose all of us who have lost someone who was a part of us have had that experience of dreaming about them in such a way that they comfort us with the assurance that all is well, or tell us that they must leave, or impart something crucial for us to know. But Marie Howe's dream is unsettling, because it makes vivid the fact that while the one who is gone is gone, they are also not gone; so far away, and yet so close. There is still unfinished business, something important to know or be said, something of life-and-death importance, but it can't be passed along.

It's inevitable that we should have such dreams. The dead know things that we do not, or at least we suspect they do, even though it seems strange to think or speak in such terms at all, the dead *knowing*. It's a projection, of course, our thoughts pushed on them.

Those who are gone from us keep a deafening silence, and the silence is part of the grief, part of what it is we labor under and by which we are heavy laden, being so close to them, and yet so far away. There is so much we want to know, and yet no way to ask.

This experience of being close and yet far away, of wanting to know and yet not knowing how to ask, is inherent in the question posed by the scribe in the story from Mark's gospel today. Something of life and death importance is at stake.

Jesus has been peppered, in a very tough press conference, by the scribes and Pharisees who attempt to entrap him in his words. The Pharisees were on his trail like hounds who have picked up a scent. They smelled blood already.

His interrogators try to get him to say that the Jews should not pay taxes because of the imprint of Caesar on the coin declaring him divine. But Jesus took the coin from them and said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." A clever resolution!

Then the Sadducees tried to get him on a marital question, a poser in which a woman is married seven times to a succession of brothers all of whom die until finally she dies herself. (Who wouldn't want to die after marrying into the same family seven times?) But the scribes want to know, "Which of the seven brothers who have been her husband on earth will be her husband in heaven?" And Jesus sees through their game, turns the tables on them and says that marriage laws relate to earthly rules and inheritance issues, but in heaven there will be none of that. Another point deftly scored for Jesus.

Finally, a scribe comes to him and asks which is the greatest commandment. But in this question there is an earnestness, an honesty, a truthfulness that has not been the case among the others. It catches Jesus off guard, and as we hear Jesus recite the *shema*, saying that there is only one God, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, we see that Jesus makes a connection with this earnest scribe, this honest seeker who is, by his seeking, so close to the kingdom.

Jesus is moved by this man's honesty, his lack of guile, and so he looks the scribe square in the eyes and says, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that, Mark notes, no one dared to ask him any further questions.

Well, excuse me! My questions just begin at that point. What is it that this man has said that has gotten him so close to the kingdom of God? What is it about loving the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength that gets you almost all the way home, almost all the way to heaven? And what is it that holds him back. What keeps him from going over the top, that gets you all the way there?

This story is reminiscent of Matthew's story of a lawyer who asks this same question, and it's similar to Luke's version in which a rich young ruler asks how to inherit the kingdom, to which Jesus says, go and sell all you have and give it to the poor and come, follow me. And the man went away sorrowful because he had many possessions.

By contrast in this story there is something else that is at stake. And the gist of it is that it is a scribe and not a ruler who is asking the question.

We do, after all, tend to have a scribal mindset about faith. We bring an earnestness to learn all the rules and keep all the jots and tittles and master all the intricacies, as if heaven were a place of infinite intellectual complexity where only the best of scribal minds can enter in.

Most of us make Christianity so complicated that nobody could live into it or up to it. We make it a matter of memorizing commandments or offering a prescribed confession in precisely the right words. We go after Christianity as if it were some fitness program in which you have to master certain moves, contort your body, if not your spirit, into inhuman twists, memorize 365 essential tenets.

The scribes were masters of the dutiful art of spiritual discipline. They carefully preserved and noted 613 commandments, scrupulously avoided saying the Almighty's name out loud for fear of divine offense, assured the fulfillment of the covenant of circumcision with every male child, observed the law scrupulously. So it came as no surprise that the scribe in the story came to Jesus with a question posed in legal terms. Those were the categories in which he had been trained.

He asked his question in the only way he could, "What is the greatest commandment?" believing that if only you could master this one thing, maybe you might have the essential key to the kingdom of heaven. But unlike those who accumulate spiritual information for the intellectual stimulation of it, his seeking arose from deep inside him, from a great need in his soul, a pure motive and an earnest longing to be closer to God. Jesus saw that unlike the questions from the other scribes there was no intellectual trap being set. This was no trick question. For this scribe, it was a life and death spiritual matter. What is the greatest commandment?

And Jesus said, "The Lord our God is one, and we must love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves." And when he said it the scribe said, "Amen," and both of them realized that there was more between them that bound them together than that separated them. So much so that looking at him, Jesus said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

In this encounter, we see Jesus offering not only teaching, but even more importantly *himself*. What Jesus came to establish was not a new legalism, not a new law, not even a new religion, but a new experience of grace. Not a new set of rules and regulations, but the fulfillment of them all. Not the institutionalization of the old covenants but a new covenant enacted in his love, poured out for us in his life, and sacrificed for us on the cross, love's most generous expression.

What happened that day between Jesus and the scribe was base line spirituality the meeting of two souls seeking and seeing God together in the depths of their hearts. The essential man who was a scribe, met the essential Jesus who was the Son of God, and in so doing found that they shared common ground in the affirmation that there is but one God and that they must love that God completely and one another as neighbors. What else do any of us really need to know? This is chapter one in the handbook of living a faithful life.

"You are not far from the kingdom of God," Jesus said, he who was the very essence of the kingdom of God standing in close proximity to the scribe; so that even his saying it was enacting it.

Fred Craddock tells the story of attending the annual meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature, a scholarly organization devoted to professional development among Biblical scholars. There were lectures being offered on textual criticism, the intertestamental period, the pseudepigrapha, and other esoteric topics of interest to Biblical scholars.

On one of the breaks, Craddock said he wandered out to the lobby and was stopped by a woman in a plain dress with a headscarf, raggedy mittens, and a worn red letter edition of the Bible in her hands.

She said she had heard that there was a Bible study going on in the hotel, that she was a new Christian, and wondered which lecture she should attend to learn more about Jesus.

Looking at the brochure of seminars, Craddock realized that there was not much there for her, so he asked her down to the coffee shop and suggested they open her Bible together and talk about their lives.

Sometimes the earnest seeker looking for God is closer to the kingdom than all the scribes put together.

If the essence of it is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself, it may not be as hard as we once thought. And on earth, that may be about as close to God as you can get, to live a life so expressive of God's love that it is unmistakably close to the kingdom of heaven.

In Leonard Bernstein's *Mass* the work begins with a soft tenor voice singing, "Sing God a simple song, lauda, laude. For God is the simplest of all." Maybe the essential thing we need to know is much simpler than we thought.

In fact, I want to suggest to you that we are all of us more close to the kingdom than we realize, a kingdom that is not only near, but already dawning, like the rising sun of the new day reaching into the darkness bringing the light with it, beginning here and now, and continuing in a way that even death cannot destroy.

William Sloan Coffin, before his own death last April wrote,

Paul insists that "neither death nor life... can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." If death, then, is no threat to our relationship to God it should be no threat to anything. If we don't know *what* is beyond the grave, we do know *who* is beyond the grave. And Christ resurrected links the two worlds, telling us that we really live only in one. ²

In a few moments as we are gathered about the table, I will read the names of the faithful departed of this congregation, loved ones dear to the heart of many of you who have died between All Saints Sunday last year, and All Saints Sunday of this year. Some names you will know and others you will not.

Every year on this first Sunday in November we do the same thing. Put out the bread, pour the cup, remember the names, give thanks to God, and then go forth into the world to be the saints we are called to be for heaven's sake today. We do this because they are with God now, and far away. We do this because they are with God now, and so are closer than the breath we breathe, for we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses in heaven and on earth, and whose lines and borders are porous.

Sometimes I feel as if heaven is already on its way, when the sun sets on a glorious crisp autumn evening. When the stars shine on a lake in the north woods on a summer night. When the day is over and the rain falls softly on the roof and a quiet aria is coming over the radio. Sometimes it's there in a child's movement in the womb. Or even in the healing dream in which someone we have loved comes to us as sure as life itself.

Heaven in a word of forgiveness, in a child's laughter, in a hand clasped in yours, in a tray of bread passed along the pew, a quiet prayer said in the heart. It's but a fraction of what the real kingdom of heaven is, I know, but something of heaven is there, so close and yet so far.

We live in this in-between time, passing our days, as we do, trusting in God's promises, loving the Lord our God, with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbor as our self; and discovering along the way that in doing so, this side of the veil, every now and then we are about as close to God as you can get.

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¹ Marie Howe, **What the Living Do**.

² William Sloan Coffin, *Credo*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 2004. 171-172.