

DID YOU NOT KNOW?

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; I Corinthians 6:12-20

One of the nicest compliments a minister can receive at the door is the comment, "I felt you were talking right to me this morning." Edmund Steimle who taught me how to preach used to say that the highest compliment that a preacher could receive at the door is the question, "How did you know?"

But with this text from I Corinthians today admonishing us as members of Christ not to be joined with prostitutes, the number of people at the door saying, "I felt you were talking right to me this morning," may be reduced rather significantly.

You may, in fact, think this an odd text for preaching especially on the weekend before a significant national change in leadership, and were it not for its appearance in the lectionary today, it might have been nice to opt for something a bit more mainstream. But maybe if we look into it there are more connections to our life today than we may first realize.

The situation in Corinth, cosmopolitan seaport city that it was, was complicated as it is in any urban setting. It was an interesting church to which Paul wrote; a church of Jewish and Gentile converts. The Jews as a people were skittish about the physical body in general, self-conscious, modest and private. The Greeks and Romans were anything but that. They were, after all the architects of the public baths. They were lovers of the *gymnasium*, the gym and the statuary of the era makes it perfectly obvious that there was a deep appreciation of the body as an art form and object of interest.

"Prostitution [one of the problems that Paul addressed in the letter to the Corinthians] was not only legal in Corinth, it was a widely accepted social convention," Richard Hays, a New Testament scholar, writes.

"[T]he Corinthian men who frequented prostitutes were not asserting some unheard of new freedom; they were merely insisting on their own right to continue participating in a pleasurable activity that was entirely normal within their own culture."¹

The warm streams of these hot blooded Gentiles were flowing into the cool waters of Jewish sensibility, in the Corinthian church.

In all of this the Corinthians had gotten a bit flustered and the tension nearly severed the unity of the church. The Gentiles had heard Paul's teaching about freedom in Christ. Sensing a compatibility with the freedom of the gospel and the philosophical ideal of freedom, they wrapped their heads around the idea that "all things are lawful for me (in Christ)." In other words, since Christ has set us free from sin and death, anything goes. This mortal life is inconsequential, and these sins of the flesh are no longer an impediment to God.

In contrast some members of First Church Corinth were abstaining from sex altogether, even within marriage, because they believed that the end of the age was near, Christ would return soon, and sexual desire was an undesirable submission to the flesh. It was not as good as keeping one's self, body and soul, pure in spirit. It was an admirable ethic, but one fraught with frustration, as you can imagine.

Into this delicate situation, Paul weighs in carefully. He asks a number of questions of the Corinthians of which we all know the answers, and Paul assumed the Corinthians did too.

“Do you not know that our bodies are members of Christ?” he asked. “Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her?” he continued. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?” he asked.

And with that last question Paul widened the issue at stake for the Corinthians to a much larger consideration of the way in which we are to understand how heaven and earth, body and spirit, the sacred and the profane are inextricably intertwined more than we ever imagined.

“Look,” Paul is saying, “our lives are shot through with God. And what we do with our actions, our thoughts, and our bodies are an expression of something that lies deep within us, expressing not only who we are but also Whose we are. If Christ already dwells within us, then our bodies are holy places, a tabernacle of God's evident presence in the world.

And if that is true, then the earth itself and our daily lives carry with them intimations of the divine, because our lives, our bodies, our whole selves, all that we are, including this whole world, and all time and eternity are God's. Everything is God's.

Paul uses the word *soma*, to refer to the body. But that word *soma* is more than just the physical, individual body itself, it is the gritty, earthy, sweaty, shivering, aching, hungering, yearning stuff of which a life is made. It is life lived and played out in the material and sensate world. It is our accomplishments, our deeds, our lusts and passions, our labor and our leisure, our joy and our sorrow. It is the plain upon which our lives are enacted.

What Paul wants us to know is that in Christ, heaven and earth have intersected, and life itself has become what the Irish call a thin place, a veil so sheer that you can look right through it and see God. Nothing is profane any longer, all of life is sacred. “Do you not know,” Paul asks, “that anyone united with the Lord becomes one spirit with him?”

The church then is not the only place on earth that is holy. Events of sacred value and eternal weight are going on around us all the time, if we will only pay attention. The veil is thin, and sometimes you can see God from right here.

Some of you have read A.J. Jacobs' book, **A Year of Living Biblically**. I've read about three quarters of it. It's a long year, you know! So it takes awhile to get through it.

Jacobs tries to live according to as much of the Bible's instruction as he could, including some of the more peculiar of the mandates like the Holiness Code in the Hebrew Scriptures. Based on a Biblical proscription in Leviticus, for instance, he gave up shaving his beard, and so through the year became more and more wild in appearance.

He took to wearing clothes that had no blend of fibers in them based on the requirements of Leviticus 19:19. He adopted a robe of white, as instructed by Ecclesiastes 9:8, and wore it on the streets of New York to work. Imagine how long it stayed white! And so it went, living Biblically for a whole year.

That's one way to try to draw closer to God; take on a discipline, live an ascetic life, become a monk, or let your beard grow and try to fulfill all 613 of the laws of Judaism.

But that's really the hard way, you know. There is another way to experience the holy in life, which is to be attentive to what is going on within you and around you knowing that you belong to Christ. And when you do you discover that in the midst of your days, without doing anything to try to invoke or invite or induce God to be more near, you discover to your surprise that you are already apprehended by God. For God is always present in your life, not external to it; because God is the Lord and giver of life, who is above all, and through all, and in all.

A friend tells the story of chasing his daughter in a game of tag around the dining room table. And at some point, worn out, breathless, my friend said he stopped and looked at his daughter laughing and realized what a special moment that this was in his life... to be so fortunate to be a dad, to have a wonderful, playful daughter, to have such friendship with her that he could play tag with her, that she was not yet old enough to realize that this was not cool... all that... and he thought to himself, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it."

Tom Are, a pastor in the Midwest, and a member of my Moveable Feast Group, said "...when Paul speaks of the body he speaks of our lives. As *soma* [the Greek word for *body* that Paul uses] we hold a spot in the long story of the human family. We are the possessor of a place on the earth and a moment in time and we are the only ones who can be faithful with that place and that moment."²

What we do with our lives, then, is not a meaningless, insignificant, passing of days and years, of no particular importance. We are known by God, cherished by God, and Christ dwells among and in us. In our lives, and in our bodies, heaven's love is made manifest in earth's touch.

God has given us a body, a measure of days, the wit to pay attention, and a life to live. It's up to us, then, to be faithful with this place where we are and this moment that we live.

We are, in this nation, at a teachable moment I think, a moment when such an understanding of near is God, and how much God relies on us, may be profoundly

important to grasp. That's very much on my mind on this Martin Luther King Memorial Weekend followed a day later by the inauguration of a new president.

I remember Martin King and the work that he did, and the way in which God dwelt so richly in him. His idealism and his hope; his passion for justice, his wisdom as to when to apply pressure, and when to ease off.

I remember his letter from a Birmingham jail, embarrassing the clergy who had implored him to go more slowly, at a time when King would not compromise. I remember his "mountain top" speech, his vision of a nation that we were yet to be, and *are* yet to be. And I have seen that balcony at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, and there remembered the shot that rang out across this nation. Dr. King was only a man, but a man in whom the presence of God was at work, a man who was called by God and put to the tasks of doing essential and practical things that helped bring justice and build peace.

His legacy was one of using his life, using his body, his gifts, his voice, his mind, all that he had, to do what was needed, and by doing so, showing us a little more clearly that thin place where heaven and earth meet.

Who would have thought it? That God could be present in the earthy, common, nitty-gritty intersection between heaven and earth where sanitation workers strike for fair wages, where a quiet lady named Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of a bus one afternoon in Montgomery, Alabama and so inspired a nation. Who would have thought that the bravery of a small group of little girls going to school one morning in Little Rock, Arkansas could overcome the decrees of a powerful governor, or that peaceful non-violence could overpower the fire hoses of human segregation and prejudice? Who could have imagined that a group of Tuskegee College graduates could break through the military color barrier, to acquit themselves in time of war, and so serve their nation to the honor of all Americans?

How could we have known that God was there in those courageous, accomplishments of daily life, making life more human, more just, and thereby more holy? Sometimes hindsight is better than foresight, but if we keep our eyes open, we cannot help but see that God is closer than we thought, standing at the thin places between heaven and earth.

Who would have thought that a routine flight taking off from La Guardia this past Thursday would lead to a forced landing in the Hudson River, and call forth from a pilot the best of his ability, and make possible the rescue of passengers standing on the wings of the plane keeping one another safe until they were rescued. Now there's an inspiring symbol for a troubled nation taking on water if I ever saw one! We're all out on that wing these days. And surely there, in that place on that wing, was the intersection between heaven and earth made obvious as well.

In two days, a new president will take the oath of office at high noon on the steps of the nation's capital. Not since Franklin Roosevelt has a president succeeded to the office at such a dire time in the nation's history. The economy is deeply troubled,

unemployment is high, there's war in Iraq and Afghanistan and Gaza. Iran and North Korea want the bomb. Everywhere people are enduring foreclosure on their mortgage, and all of us are cutting back on expenses, as dreams are deferred if not broken.

I am not sure whether this is one of the most opportune or one of the most discouraging times a president has ever taken office. Maybe the success or failure of President-Elect Obama's tenure will depend on whether he can keep seeing it as an opportunity rather than a discouragement. If he succeeds, the recovery of the nation on his watch may just be one of the more dramatic periods in all of American history.

And if it is so, it will be accomplished by people like us who join with him in doing the things that must be done day after day, week after week, year after year that express the highest hope and essential sacrifices that all of us must make in order to allow God to do what God can and will do through us.

In the everyday decisions and practical plans and mundane policies that will be implemented, the course of the nation will be set. I hope that the new president will ask us to make sacrifices for the common good. To look after each other with care and to take responsibility for one another in those places where the government cannot and should not.

I hope the high ideals and good will that he enjoys in this moment will not be lessened by selfish gain or by what politics so often does to even the best of leaders.

We cannot expect him to be anything more than human in his efforts. But if Paul is right, there is enough of heaven in each of us that even our most failing and human of efforts may have something of God in them.

Our earnest prayer on this weekend when we honor Martin Luther King Jr, and as we stand as a nation, precariously on that wing hanging on for dear life and looking forward to a new presidency, is that the God, who works in us and through us, and often beyond us, will make so porous the boundaries of heaven and earth, that a new vision of our nation may emerge within all of us, and that God's best hope for us may be fulfilled in our daily lives.

Our lives, after all, are hid with God in Christ. And so we live these days, looking to show in our actions and in our deeds the presence of the One who has given us life itself, Him who is above all and through all and in all. To that God be the glory now and forever. Amen.

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¹ Richard Hays, **First Corinthians**. *Interpretation* commentary series.
Louisville: John Knox, 1997. 102

² Tom Are, Moveable Feast Paper, unpublished. Santa Fe gathering January 5-9, 2009.