



SUNDAY SERMON

The Power of One

A Reading from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 10, verses 34 to 43.

Peter began to speak to Cornelius and the other Gentiles: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 3, verses 13 to 17.

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Julian of Norwich is one of my favorite mystical companions in prayer. At the age of thirty, in about 1372 AD, Julian contracted a grave illness and came so near death they gave her last rites. At the end of her illness, she had several visions, or showings, that she understood to have come from God. She spent the next twenty years reflecting on these visions and writing down what she had learned from them. Perhaps, the most famous is this one, and I quote:

"And in this [God] showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was answered generally thus, 'It is all that is made.' I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.

"In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it."

In this smallest of things, God revealed to Julian the fullness of life and God's love for all that God has made. In this one thing, the truth of all life is revealed. Many people I know are feeling on edge these days. Change is afoot. What will it look like? Who will be most affected? Some wonder, will I be safe?

Continued

DATE

The Feast of the
Baptism of Our Lord
Sun., Jan. 8, 2017

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

READINGS

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

In his New York Times Op-Ed a couple of weeks ago, Arthur Brooks of the American Enterprise Institute, described the “psychic numbing” many of us experience when we feel overwhelmed by the enormity and complexity of life’s challenges.

Brooks proposed a solution: “Think small. In the fundraising business, there’s an old axiom that “one is greater than one million.” This isn’t bad math; it is a reminder that when it comes to people in need, one million is a statistic, while one is a human story.”

While the news reported over half a million deaths from the Civil War in Syria, “International philanthropic support increased only after a news photo spread around the world of a small boy dead on the beach, drowned as his family made the dangerous crossing from Turkey to Greece.”

In that little body on the beach we saw first that God made him, second that God loves him, and third that God keeps him. Through him we were awakened ... to our love for one another, our responsibility—nay, our desire—a divine, irresistible desire—to care for all whom God has made.

This is, if you will, the power of one. The power of one as the means of grace. And it was in this way that Christ, working through the Holy Spirit, led Peter and the Apostles, and eventually all of us who follow in Christ’s name, to understand that God shows no partiality. For this is something we apparently need to learn, as individuals and as a people and as people of faith, time and again; that God shows no partiality; God’s love envelops all.

You see, this is what is given in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Commentaries refer to this passage as a sermon spoken by Peter. He offers a succinct if rather unremarkable summary of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But he begins his remarks with the affirmation of a truth that he’s just discovered: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.”

What we need to know is that Peter was in the courtyard of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, speaking to Cornelius and his entire assembled household. We need to know that Cornelius and his people were not Jews, were not adherents and followers of the Law, that they were part of the oppression, part of the problem, that by even being in their presence in their home, Peter was rendering himself ritually unclean, stained; an offense to his people and his faith. And we need to know that Cornelius was a good man. Finally, we need to know that Peter was not standing there of his own accord; this was not his idea. Peter was clear, and the text is clear, that Peter—and Cornelius—were following the direction of the Holy Spirit. This occasion was occasioned by the will of God.

It was one thing for Jesus to say, “I have come for all.”

It is altogether different when the Spirit plunks Peter down at Cornelius table’ and says to the two of them, “Break bread. Eat. Together. You are brothers.” And they look at one another, and they see one another. The power of one.

I invite you to call to mind that first time when you spent time with someone who was not your people, nor from your tribe, your part of the world, your clan. Their accent was different, their skin, their politics, their education, their sexual orientation, their anything or everything was different. And being in the presence of that “one,” it was no longer “them,” “those people” who you’d heard about, read about, been warned to steer clear of; when the stereotype, the preconception and the prejudice was unmasked as shallow and ignorant. For the Spirit had led you to this place, to this table, this conversation, with this one particular person, and said, eat, you are sisters; you are brothers; you are kinfolk, beloved children of the most high. Has that not happened to you somewhere along the way? I hope so. I hope you can recall a time when, surprised by grace, you showed up, were fully present, in the company of someone altogether unlikely.

Peter’s words are just words until we speak them: Now, I truly understand. I truly understand. I truly understand ... I get it ... that God shows no partiality. Do we? Do you?

In her poem, “Sometime,” Mary Oliver offers ~

Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention

Be astonished

Tell about it

Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it. This is what Peter did. Peter had had a bizarre dream with a great picnic blanket descending from the sky; he was instructed to eat food forbidden by his faith. Followed by an invitation from a guy he’d never met, a guy he had been taught to fear and despise. This was not an easy or obvious sequence of events. Pay attention. And when he got there, he found that Cornelius had gathered his entire household to hear what he, Peter, had to say. I get it. This is the Spirit. Be astonished.

Continued

Peter's sermon is not the end of the story. Our text continues, "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word."

Tell about it—those little "ah hah!" moments along the way. You are witnesses to the power of the Spirit and the love of God. Tell about it. If not you, in your life, with the people you know, then who? Who's going to speak? Who is going to be the one in this moment, this classroom, this meeting, this dinner table, in this air thick with psychic numbing?

"Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ."

And when he left there, Peter went straight to Jerusalem to join his friends, to tell them what he'd seen and realized, and to change the rules of how they did church—and who was in and who was out. It's never been the same since.

There is no shortage of large, intractable challenges facing us, too often dividing us. I for one can feel overwhelmed and, feeling overwhelmed, can feel stuck, immobilized. Pay attention, Ledlie. God may be showing you a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of your hand, as it seemed. Right here. In a dream or a stranger, an invitation to break your own rules, cross a boundary. Be astonished. God is present in the one in whom you least expect. Then, tell about it. Oh, for the love of God, tell about it. That the love in your heart may be bread of life for a neighbor starving this day for the taste of truth—even from you.