

“Meeting God in the other”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 25:31-40

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

If I were to ask you, “Where is God?”, what would you say? Would you say, God’s in the heavens? Or in the laws of physics? Or on a mountaintop, or in the forest somewhere, or perhaps in a manger, or upon a cross? Would you say, God’s everywhere or in one particular place? Is God here, in this church? Is God there, with you, right now? Maybe you’d just say, it’s a mystery and leave it at that.

In Jesus’ time, philosophers would have said that God resided in the realm of ideals, a perfect place of the good and the true. Not all that different, I suppose, from Jesus’ brethren, who would have said that God is in heaven, his earthly existence only experienced in the inner sanctum of the great temple, the holy of holies.

But people had other answers too. The Greeks and the Romans believed that their gods could walk among them, appearing as mortals, fighting in battles, falling in love, eating at your table.

Of course, if you came of age in the 90s, you’re probably likely to burst into song, with the hit Joan Osborne song: “What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us, just a stranger on the bus, trying to make His way home.” (I’m not going to sing it for you—you’re welcome—but oh, the tingly nostalgia.)

Perhaps it was in the same spirit that, in the early 1950s, after having escaped Nazi Germany with his Jewish family, Fritz Eichenberg—now a Quaker—created a wood engraving called, “Christ of the Breadlines.” You can see it on our Facebook page. It depicts Jesus among six others as they wait in line at a soup kitchen.

It’s very different from other depictions of Jesus and of God. This is no Michelangelo, where God sits in the heavens, perched on a cloud, reaching down. This is no Raphael, where Christ hangs on a cross, his muscles rippling, his face serene, still powerful even unto death. This is no Rubens where Christ bursts from a motley of enemies and disciples, full of action and energy.

Here, in the words of Paul Luikart, “Jesus is weak. He’s wrapped in rags. He’s entirely in shadow. No bulging abs, no mountainous biceps. And the figures in the painting with Him are still. They stand, with the Lord of the universe in their midst, motionless in their deep poverty and hunger, wanting the same thing He wants—rest, fulfillment, an end to suffering.”¹

This is a quiet, still God, walking among the hurting.

¹ “Relief: A Journal of Art and Faith”

It may be that Eichenberg best expressed the radical answer of early Christianity. When they asked Christians, “Where is God?”, they didn’t point to the heavens. They didn’t philosophize. They didn’t peer into a church or a temple. They didn’t tell stories of mighty gods pretending to be mortal, tricking us. They pointed to a person, to his suffering, to his compassion, to his love, and said: “There’s God.”

Today, Jesus tells a story. He imagines the day of judgment. Some people are told that they are blessed and shall inherit the kingdom of God, because when the Son of Man, Christ, was in need, they took care of him. They welcomed him into their homes. They put food before him. They clothed him from their own closet. They sat beside him, when he was sick. They visited him, when in prison. They loved him. They didn’t do it perfectly. But they did their best to love him. And because of that, Jesus says that they are welcomed into eternal joy. But they are confused. They say, “When did we ever do these things for you, Christ? We’ve never met you before.” Christ answers, “Oh, yes, you have. Every time you helped another person, you were doing that for me, for these people are part of me. They are members of my family. I dwell in them, for they are fashioned in the image of God, and the light of God abides in them, and they are my body, flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone, love of my love.”

It’s so easy for us to never really see one another. We walk right past each other, often never giving a second glance. What would happen if we took the time, and the care, to see each other, our truest joys and hurts, our stories, our longings? Would we have to shield our eyes from the sheer light of the glory before us? Would we realize that, all along, this had been Christ... this had been God?

What if, when you looked at the old woman curled in her bed, her skin paper thin, her mind stretching beyond the walls of her nursing home, what if you saw God? What if, when you looked at the man begging on the side of the road, a crude cardboard sign in his hand, a scruffy beard and gaunt body, what if you saw God? What if, when that child asks to play, her voice full of hope and unicorns and castles, what if you saw God?

What if Christ is all around us, in breadlines and hospitals, among friends and strangers, checking us out at the cash register and bagging our groceries, even staring at us from the mirror? What if Christ is there wherever someone is hurting, or afraid, or daring to dream?

A year ago, Westminster commissioned a strategy team called Holy Conversations to help us prayerfully discern who we are as a church, how we should change or not change, what our purpose is and what it’s not. For a year now, we’ve been listening—to experts and researchers, to God and Scripture, and to you. And we’re not done. We’re still listening. If you haven’t already, you’ll be hearing from us over the coming months, wanting to take the time to know you.

We do not yet know how and where God is calling us. But we do know one thing. When asked to choose a biblical story that reflects this particular time in the life of our church, the Holy Conversations team chose two Bible stories. One of them was the one we read today: Matthew 25.

The team chose this story, because, while the details of our calling remain unrevealed, the calling itself is clear: we are a church called to see God in the other. All churches of course are called to do this, but every church has its own emphasis. Some are teaching churches, some bastions of doctrine, some starting places for seekers, some places of calm. We are a church called to see God in the other. We are a church of many different people, of different ages and disabilities, sexualities and gender identities, economic statuses and ethnicities, politics and theologies. We're a church of misfits, who somehow fit together because we care what the other thinks and feels, because we believe that the other has something of God to offer us. You come here, and no matter who you are, you are loved. And we're committed to making the world more like that.

For all our imperfections—and boy, are there a lot—this is a healing church. This church reminds you that, no matter what you've heard, and no matter what you've told yourself—child—God is in you. Glory is in you. You have a purpose. And we want to be at your side, as you discover it.

There's a nuance here I want to be sure we don't miss. Often, when we help others, when we serve food or advocate on someone's behalf, we think we're Christ in that scenario. But that's not what Jesus says in this parable. In the way he tells it, the people doing the kindness, they're not Christ. Christ is the person receiving the help. Christ is the person on the other side of the plate of food. And we need him, as much as he needs us. This isn't charity; this is people in need helping each other. We need the person with disabilities or mental health challenges. We need the person who has nowhere to sleep. We need the person struggling for justice. They show us God.

To see God in the other isn't to think they're perfect. It doesn't mean they're always right or good. To see God in the other is to acknowledge that there is something in the other worth protecting, something worth feeding and clothing and loving and listening to and learning from.

Jesus asks us to see one another as he sees us.

It's like how, in that wood carving by Fritz Eichenberg, the whole picture is dark. There is only one source of light: the halo above Jesus' head. It is his light that illuminates the others who wait in the breadline with him; it is only by his light that we see them.

It's almost as if the point of the etching isn't Jesus at all; it's the people whom he illuminates.

So, let's return to the question: Where is God? God is in you and me, wherever love calls out to love, wherever the vulnerability in you reaches out to the vulnerability in me, wherever grief or longing or delight embrace. God is in the breadline, waiting for you to see, not just God, but all the people around him. To see them, to love them, and say, with one collective gasp, WOW.

Amen.