

Sermon Notes:

Sunday, May 08, 2011

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Neighborhood House

Listening...

There's an old saying that: All politics is local.

I think it's true and a good thing, because if it were not, if there were not actions we could take to impact our lives and the lives of others in our local areas – everyone would sort of just be absent, folks left behind, while others are off seeking broader national and international goals.

At the same time, being local is not a call to live in isolation. Our “local” is clearly a parallel to someone else’s “local.” Lined up side-by-side into the limits of global dimensions, the intersection of global lives, geopolitics, environmental impact, and humanitarian causes is a real nexus and tension.

Those who enter into such arenas are the agents that will one day, hopefully, bind us together in ways that make “universal” a local attribute.

There is just no way to getting away from local.

And even more emphasis of this come when facing religion, faith, what we believe in, the traditions we follow, the meaning we seek in relation to spirituality – spirituality which challenges the notions of local and universal both, since spirituality/God – encompasses all our definitions and designs; pale representations of what is beyond our understanding, all existing without any of our efforts on our part to create it.

Rather we are somewhere in the soup, exploring as we climb from one potato to another – never quite getting a clear vision of the flame that hears it all!

If we are then explorers of God, starting out from each of our local settings, how do you, I, others live and work in our surroundings and for them without losing sight that this is about the depths of the Spirit, already revealed, beyond our comprehension and visions, rooted in faith...often, well, confusing and inaccessible.

This line of thought began where it often does for me, in preparation for speaking with you – wondering how I could possibly integrate all that transpires globally that we know about or should know about – and then from there trying to find a message in the readings that reveals, perhaps, that our spiritual work has local roots – without locking ourselves in the “upper room” out of fear or discomfort,

dipping our toes into the world only to the degree that causes us the least pain, fear, disappointment, or disruption to the happiness we seek. Sometimes it is about confusion and disappointment...

In today's reading of Luke, we come again upon the "Road to Emmaus." It is three days after Jesus' crucifixion; the women have been to the empty tomb and encountered the messengers, angels, who tell them Jesus has risen from the slab; Jesus who appears to Mary, who at first thinks he is the gardener; and now Jesus who walks incognito with Cleopas and his companion – the seven miles to Jerusalem.

This narrative is rich in many themes. It is generally a favorite of anyone who has a chance to speak about it. Today, I want to speak about the part where Jesus appears on the road, keeping himself hidden from Cleopas and his unnamed companion as they walked. Here in this small local bit of countryside, the Eternal, Universal, Extensive presence of Jesus intersects with two individuals walking on a dusty path, downtrodden, confused, hurt, and lost.

Jesus did not stop them and say, "Cleopas, Friend – it is I!" Let me take away your confusion, pain, disappointment, fear...No. Instead he came upon them as a stranger and engaged them in conversation and listened to them describe the events that had taken place. And nothing takes place as quickly as it is written, so he must have listened for a while before he spoke.

I wonder if, as he did listen, Jesus' heart burned, as theirs later would, hearing their words and feeling their sorrow. He stayed with them, in their pain, and listened to them – letting them speak...and then he began.

It's a comforting truth to know that Jesus listens, God listens, Spirit listens. The cosmic, eternal – beyond words – Eternal God listens to us, as Jesus listened to Cleopas and his companion.

Intersections...fabric of the universe...

Jesus, who embodied the eternal, listened to them. The eternal spiritual presence of God in Jesus paused to listen to the two on the road to Emmaus. A walk...

Listening is an interesting topic, it is the very receptive part of us that embodies all forms of reception, visual, auditory, written, emotional – because ultimately all listening somehow lands in the heart. It is there that the "more than the mind that we are" brings it together.

Listening to one another is a deeper mystery than just conversation or and intellectual processing. It makes me think that the great spiritual presence of God is spoken and heard in first listening to others, to the sounds of our

neighborhoods, to the voices in streets, to those who arrive on our doorstep. And it's listening with an ear toward revelation.

And, I do mean revelation.

Over a period of four or five years, I did three units of CPE in a trauma one medical center as part of my training for being a chaplain. It was there, as I have said before, that I learned of the power of "presence and prayer." In retrospect, I would also say that it is the place where I came to know revelation as a reality (in a way) rather than some mystical, distant phenomenon. It was there I learned to ask the questions, sometimes tough questions that would help other to speak about what was really going on – and to have someone listen. And in that place things would be revealed.

That's not to say the listening is always easy. In chaplaincy we referred to it as "staying with someone in their pain." Just being there. Not running away...those who hang in there: the women who were at the foot of the cross, just as Jesus was with these two companions. Only after listening did he have something to say. Sometimes...there was just nothing to say. Being present, quiet, in prayer was enough.

In this morning's reading, Jesus eventually starts to teach, saying to Cleopas and his friend that all the things they describe had to happen – and Jesus then leads them through the Scriptures from Moses right to their present, teaching them. And as important as that was, they still did not recognize him.

It was only later, when they invited Jesus to stay and then he broke bread with them – at the table – that their eyes were opened, suggesting that while study is important, hospitality, welcoming, and sharing the table are the ways the God will most be revealed among us.

It is an affirmation that Jesus is always with us, especially if when we do those things...we do them in remembrance of him in all that means to us. It is the table and the presence of God and the prayers that remind us that being present is being local – in one parallel setting or another – and welcoming the intersection, the universal fabric of the presence of God – who is with us always, calling us closer – not to answers but to the promise and the mystery that that helps us find God in our lives.

"A young couple was in a restaurant with their four-year-old son. They were being waited on by one of those experienced waitresses who never show contempt for a customer, but by their unhurried pace and level gaze make it evident they fear no mortal, not even parents. She jotted on her pad, deliberately and quietly, while the parents gave their selections including substitutions and such. She turned to the boy and he began his order in a kind of fearful desperation.

"I want a hot dog," he started. His parents barked in unison, "No hot dog!" The mother scowled at the boy who fell silent, and said, "Bring him the vegetable and grilled chicken, milk and..."

The waitress ignored the parents as she looked directly at the boy. "What do you want on your hot dog?"

The amazed child said, "Lots of ketchup, and a pickle, too. And could you bring some milk?"

"Coming up," she said and turned from the table, never even looking at the stunned parents. The boy watched her depart with astonished delight and then said to his dismayed parents, "You know what? She thinks I'm real! She thinks I'm real."¹

You know what? God thinks you're real, too...and all of God in all God's ways is listening. May you be listening, too.

¹ Homan, Daniel Father. Benedict's Way of Love. Paraclete Press, MA. 2002. pp.214-215