

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church & Neighborhood House
Sunday, October 23, 2011

Leviticus 19
Matthew 22:34-40

First to be REAL

There once was a velveteen rabbit, and in the beginning he was really splendid. He was fat and bunchy, as a rabbit should be; his coat was spotted brown and white, he had real thread whiskers, and his ears were lined with pink sateen. On Christmas morning, when he sat wedged in the top of the Boy's stocking, with a sprig of holly between his paws, the effect was charming.

There were other things in the stocking, nuts and oranges and a toy engine, and chocolate almonds and a clockwork mouse, but the Rabbit was quite the best of all. For at least two hours the Boy loved him, and then Aunts and Uncles came to dinner, and there was great rustling of tissue paper and unwrapping parcels, and in the excitement the Velveteen Rabbit was forgotten.

For a long time he lived in the toy cupboard or on the nursery floor, and no one thought very much about him. He was naturally shy, and being made only of velveteen, some of the more expensive toys quite snubbed him. The model boar, who had lived through two seasons and lost most of his paint, caught the tone from them and never missed an opportunity of referring to his rigging in technical terms.. The Rabbit could not claim to be a model of anything, for he didn't now that real rabbits existed; he thought they were all stuffed with sawdust like himself, and he understood that sawdust was quite out-of-date and should never be mentioned in modern circles. Even Timothy, the jointed wooden lion, who was made by the soldiers who were disabled, and should have broader views, put on airs and pretended he was connected with the Government. Between them all the poor little Rabbit was made to feel himself very insignificant and commonplace, and the only person who was kind to hi at all was the Skin Horse.

The Skin Horse had lived longer than any of the others. He was so old that his brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath, and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces. He was wise, for he had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and swagger, and by-and0by break their mainspring and pass away, and he knew that they were only toys and would never turn into anything else. For nursery magic is very strange and wonderful and only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse understand about it.

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happened to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become REAL.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit.”

“It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

I suppose *you* are Real?” said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.

“The Boy’s Uncle made me Real,” he said. “That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can’t become unreal again. It lasts for always.”

This is from the opening first few pages of *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams. It was a gift given to me by one of the members of the church that first called me in 2005. It has sat on my bookshelf since.

As I began to prepare this morning’s comments, I thought I would use something from Annie Dillard, a favorite author of mine and many others. I was sure that she would have something that integrated the message of this morning’s readings into the vernacular of our day.

Instead, I stumbled across *The Velveteen Rabbit* – and for some reason, I began to read. As I did, I found myself thinking about how we have always been loved by God. Loved into existence by God. And then things change once we emerge onto this planet, at least for many of us.

We move into the world from our previous dimensions and immediately are influenced – from the moment of conception in the number of ways that is now possible to take place. It’s as though once the chromosomes combine that begin

the process of life – a Receiver is born: sensing, touching, feeling, consciousness forming into concepts, constructs, and slowly the world becomes real. From the arms of those who love us, to the rooms in which we live, the neighborhoods we grow up in, the city, state, nation, world, universe – all slowly becoming part of our perception. We come to know what in German sociological terms is referred as *sitz im lieben*: that is our place and function within the community in which we live.

But along the way our place in the world veers often from the Love which first made us Real – long before we were ever born. Signals and perceptions can overwhelm us, the ways of the world can become dominant, driving, even obsessive – to the exclusion of all else.

But that Creative Love of God never disappears. It sometimes lies dormant or quiet for a long time. What many of us realize is that in the times of the most difficulty it is that Love which sustains us through the broken springs and jagged edges of life. It is the Love of God that makes the difference in who we are in this world and how we respond to the world and one another – not in achievement or accomplishments – but in what makes us Real – *authentic* - to one another and ourselves: knowing where we came from, where we are now, and to where we it is we are returning to at the end of this journey.

Whether in the Sh'ma, the most important of all Jewish prayers, a prayer Jesus surely prayed often; whether in guidelines of Leviticus that protected and instructed an emerging nation and hundred of generations of Jews, including Jesus; or the words of Jesus himself in reminding us of the Greatest of Commandments. We are Real because God has made us Real through God's Love, with only the simplest of commandments...demands for living here.

As Silk Horse said in *The Velveteen Rabbit*, you can't be ugly (we'll change that a bit to unwelcome or unloved) except by people who don't understand. And for those people, we pray.

When we are Real, we understand who we are, where we are, and what it is we need to do: We understand, too, that it takes time and experience to learn all this in the deepest of ways, but in the end, when we are Real, the message is as it always has been:

Jesus was asked:

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

He said to him,

"You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart,
with all your soul, and with all your mind.

This is the greatest and the first commandment.

The second is like it:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

Real, indeed. May we all be this Real.