

Acts 17:22-31 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

John 14:15-21 “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

God’s Love Revealed **June 18, 2017**

This has been a challenging week as we watched in horror the devastating fire to the housing complex in West London where so many innocent people died. And then the very next morning, a shooting in DC, which has rocked our own nation’s capital and then another shooting at a UPS facility in San Francisco. We also remembered this week the victims of last year’s tragic shooting at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando Florida. I don’t know about you but I am just about full to overflowing with stories like those. My heart is broken and I struggle with being hopeful and faithful. I find myself needing to hear again the stories of God’s love revealed through the actions and prayers of others and I hope you will indulge me as I dwell on stories today that bring hope and encouragement. I think we all need that at times, don’t we? Which is not to say that we are avoiding the pain of this world and this life. We know that God is present in all these moments and we grieve, pray, and mourn with all those who suffer. But for today, let me remind us of some moments of God’s surprising presence in our lives. Moments that remind us that the Holy Spirit is still at work within and around us. Pentecost happens every day.

I love these two passages of scripture. Paul challenges us to remember that we are hungry for God and that even if we don’t fully understand how God moves in the world, she is present. Present in ways that are always surprising and mysterious. And Jesus also reminds us that he is in God, and God is in him, and he is in us. It creates this wonderful circle of connection that is revealed as we share Gods love to all whom we meet in this lifetime. And even if we don’t recognize it when it happens, God is there.

I read this quote by C.S. Lewis which I thought was so wonderful and I wanted to share it with you. He said, “When we die we will not say, “Lord I could never have guessed how beautiful you are.” We will not say that. Rather we will say, “So...it was you all along. Everyone I ever loved...it was you. Everyone who loved me...it was you. Everything decent or fine that ever happened to me, everything that made me reach out and try to be better...it was you all along.”

And so, this morning, I want to share a couple stories where I think it is clear that this oneness with God is present, and that as love and attention are shared with others, Jesus is revealed and our true hunger is satisfied.

Pastor Mary Barnett shared this wonderful story in the *Christian Century* magazine under the theme of *Surprise*, which I found so lovely. She shared a story of when she was doing her Clinical Pastoral care in seminary. It speaks to a place where God surprises and meets us right where we are. She tells it like this, “I walk in and the patient looks up from the bed. We talk for a while, but it is clear she doesn’t really want to talk. I finally offer to bring her a rosary and will put her on the priest’s list for communion later in the day.

I glance at her room number as I sprint down the hall for a brief lunch with my peer group. I also call admitting and change my patient’s religion to *Catholic* from *None*, the erroneous designation on the census. Now the priest will be sure to stop by her room.

Forty-five minutes later I’m back, with two rosaries for her to choose from. But something is wrong. It isn’t her—it’s not the same room. “Excuse me,” I say. “I didn’t promise to bring you a rosary just now, did I?”

“Certainly not,” she says. Silence.

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “I’m Mary, the spatially challenged chaplain, just doing my rounds. And rounds and rounds, I guess.”

She Laughs. “What kind of chaplain *are* you?”

“Lost,” I say, and we both laugh. “We are here to provide spiritual and emotional support. Not directions. Do you have a faith tradition?”

“Greek Orthodox.”

“Oh!” I say, eager to rush in, to fix my kerfuffle, to tell her that just a few steps away we have a real bone fide Greek Orthodox chaplain able and willing to be rushed to the scene.

“But I keep thinking of becoming a Catholic.”

“Really, I say.”

“My husband was Catholic.” Long pause. Deep sigh. Does the sigh signal divorce and regret or deceased and sad? No clue. I take a chance, “He is...gone?”

“Yes,” she says, “Last year. He was wonderful. And sometimes I think I would feel closer to him if I was Catholic.” Then she says, “I felt his presence once.”

“Really? Tell me.”

“We were at his family’s place, she says. We always met there for Christmas. We’d go out caroling in the snow, going door to door and singing, and I went up with the kids because it was still our tradition, you know. The weather was bad so, they stayed in and sang by the fire. Suddenly, I felt this pressure all alongside me,

she says. She touches her hip gently and runs her hand up to her shoulder and back down. “All along my hip and arm.”

It’s an intimate moment. I am in the room with her love for her husband and the presence—even the pressure—of his love for her.

“So…” she says, snapping out of the memory. “I was just telling my girlfriend on the phone that I want to be Catholic, and you walked in. She told me I should call a priest when I go home.”

I am getting up to leave but I hesitate at the doorframe, turning back. “You want to know something funny?” I ask.

“Sure,” she says.

“If we do nothing, a Catholic priest is already on his way.” I explain the census and my message to the priest, mistakenly identifying room 708 as a Catholic who wants communion. “You know, because I mixed up the numbers,” I say.

“I don’t think you mixed them up,” she says.

“Oh, geez.” I backtrack, not wanting to encourage angelology.

“Could you possibly get me a rosary too?” she asks. So, I pull out the two rosaries stuffed in my pockets. One of which will eventually end up in the hands of its intended recipient, the patient I successfully find later that afternoon. “You pick one for me,” she says, transported.

I hesitate, not sure what territory we are traveling here. “You pick,” I say, trying to sound generous but knowing she will experience this as resistance to the miraculous. She wants an angel. I want her to be in charge of all her choices. I freeze, my arms outstretched balancing two rosaries in the palms of my hands.

At that moment, a nurse, walks in without knocking, “Oh honey, that pink one has you written all over it,” the nurse says immediately.

My angel beams.” (*The Christian Century*, June 7, 2017)

I’m gonna live so God can use me anywhere, Lord, anytime. I’m gonna live so God can use me anywhere, Lord, anytime.

A story is told of a mother who, rather than asking her children the question: “How was your day?” did something much more helpful. As she tucked her children into bed each night, she asked them this question: “Where did you meet God today?”

In answer to her question about where they met God, they would answer, one by one: “A teacher helped me; there was a homeless person in the park; I saw a tree with lots of flowers on it.” After they finished telling her where they had met God that day, she would tell them where she met God, too. I would love to develop that discipline, wouldn’t you?

I’ve been reading a delightful book by River Jordan called *Praying for Strangers*. In the book, she describes a New Year’s resolution, where she decided she would pray for one stranger every day. The stories are filled with wonderful and holy encounters with others and sometimes she learns some stark truths about herself along the way. It is a book filled with stories where she encounters God on a daily basis. In one of her stories called *Back Alleys and Well Wishes*, she shared that she had been studying for finals in a favorite donut shop which had free refills on coffee, which she took full advantage of. After one particular study session, she packed up

her books and got in the car to head home. She tells it like this. “When I pulled around to the rear of the store to exit the parking lot, I saw a man rummaging through the dumpster for food. The sight of this affected me so greatly that I stopped, rolled down the window, and called him over. I took out a folded twenty-dollar bill and passed it to him.

Now, twenty dollars when I was a young mother returning to school was more than a lot. But it’s what I had and it’s what I felt moved to give. I know there was a chance that this man was a bum, a drug user, or chose a life of living on the streets when other options were open to him. That wasn’t the point at the moment. What was imperative, was that I act with grace, that I take action regarding the thing that moved me. That all logical reasons not to bless the man with twenty dollars be washed aside for the moment because maybe there really was a traceable chain of events that had brought him to this place.

The man came to the car window and I passed him the folded up bill. Dirt streaked his face and hands but not too badly, all things considered. But then this is what happened, and this is why it’s still in my memory, and why it comes to mind so many years later.

His eyes lit up from the inside. I don’t mean that in a movie-special-effects kind of way, not even in the way that wonderfully strange things happen in my novels. I mean it in the way that the light in someone’s soul can suddenly shine a little brighter and the eyes seem to be the very place that light breaks loose and shines most.

“*And how are you today?*” he asked me with such genuine interest, with such empathy, that as far as I was concerned, he could have been Jesus in the flesh.

Me? How am I? I had this incredulous feeling of *how could anything possibly be wrong with me?* After all, I’m not foraging in dumpsters for food. But the way he asked it, the sincerity in his voice and face, caused my heart to jump and tears to spring into my eyes. *I don’t really know, I wanted to say. I’m not sure I can tell you, honest-to-goodness and down-to-the-bone, exactly how I am, but thank you, thank you for actually asking.*”

And then I realize that’s the key. How often are we really touched by the sincerity of the question, of someone asking and really wanting to know exactly how we are? I think it’s a rare occurrence, even with spouses and family and the closest of friends. The flipside of the coin, of course, is how often are we asking the people closest to us how they are and really taking the time then to listen?

Months and months of introducing myself to strangers and basically telling them, *I care how you are. Is there anything special you’re going through? Anything special you need prayer for?* has made it perfectly clear that people aren’t getting these questions often enough. Its why people are so taken by surprise, or refreshed, or so touched. It’s a hungry world out there. People are starving for one single touch, a breath of a prayer. It’s really not too much to ask.”

The Apostle Paul says we are all hungry for God. We grope and search for the divine as we go through our lives. That it is in that Love, that we live and move and have our being. And Jesus reminds us that the love of God, which resides within you, is the very love and presence that this hungry world is looking for. And so I hope that in these days when we feel lost and afraid and the world around us seems to be coming apart at the seams, that we will look for God’s love as it is revealed in our interaction with the lives of others as we walk this journey of faith together.

I’ll leave you with this wonderful prayer by Frederick Buechner from his book *The Hungering Dark*, where he prays, “Lord, catch us off guard today. Surprise us with some moment of beauty or pain so that for at least a moment we may be startled into seeing that you are here in all your splendor, always and everywhere, barely hidden, beneath, beyond, within this life we breathe.” Amen.