

April 19, 2009
Acts 4:32-35; Ps 133
1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

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How did you come to know the world? Did your parents hold you, sing to you? Did you put your finger on a hot stove, splash through mud-puddles, fill your mouth with dirt and rocks and grass, smell the honeysuckle and listen to the sounds of birds even before you had seen them or knew their names? This is the time of year when our senses come alive. After months of white and brown silence, with your skin too wrapped in wool to feel, suddenly the world is “mud-luscious” and “puddle-wonderful”;¹ a feast for ear and eye.

Perhaps few people were so aware of the interconnection of sensory experience and sense of self than Helen Keller, who became deaf and blind when she was nineteen months old. Cut off from all meaningful contact with others, Helen quickly became out-of-control, terrorizing her family with temper tantrums and smashing everything in sight. Finally, the family hired Anne Sullivan to serve as Helen’s tutor. After a month with little progress, the breakthrough happened. Helen wrote, “We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word ‘water,’ first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten, a thrill of returning thought, and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me.” In that sudden convergence of sense and thought, Helen regained the world.

Too often, I think, the church preaches and acts as if the religious life were a thing of the mind: an act of will, a set of beliefs -- captivating, perhaps, but disembodied. At best, the body is often portrayed as a source of temptation: of desires which we must control, deny, or sublimate. Nothing could be farther from this fallacy than the words St. John writes today: “We declare to you...what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.” (1 John 1:1) At the very beginning of his letter to the churches, John identifies himself as a credible witness to the truth, not because he has thought about it or believed in some set of philosophical propositions, but because he has seen Jesus, touched Jesus, listened to him, walked with him -- known him *in the flesh*. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is an embodied revelation, known through the flesh, for we are embodied creatures, and our salvation in Christ must reach all of us.

Thomas, too, craved the reassurance of the flesh. It was not enough, for him, that his friends had seen and spoken to Jesus; he demanded that he encounter Christ himself, in the most intimate of ways: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” (John 20:25) Thomas demands that he be able to touch the very wounds which Christ received on the cross, for only so will he be able to know that this is the same man who was dead and now lives again, the same man who loved him enough to suffer real pain, to endure real loss, to die a real death. Like the stretch-marks on a woman’s stomach which prove that a baby really was in there, these scars attest to a sacrificial love. And so Christ comes to him, a week later, and gives him that chance, but Thomas does not take it. Instead, he kneels at Christ’s feet and exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28)

But this poses a problem for us, late-comers that we are, who follow Jesus at a two-thousand-years’ remove, distant in space and time from that man of flesh-and-blood. If even the

¹ e.e.cummings, “In Just-”

disciples who knew Jesus needed to be reassured in the flesh to have full conviction of his resurrection, how are we to come to fullness of faith? Jesus gives a partial answer in John's Gospel, when he looks at Thomas and says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:29) Blessed are we, in other words, when we can take things on faith, trust the accounts of witnesses, "because if [we] confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in [our] heart that God raised him from the dead, [we] will be saved." (Rom 10:9) And yet...still, there is a gap between mind and sense, between our soul's way of knowing God and our usual way of learning the world -- the same gap that troubled Thomas and challenged John.

But Christ, who came in the flesh, also left behind him a set of bridges called 'sacraments,' through which we can close the distance between mind and sense. Sacraments are sign-acts which Christ taught us to do because they are ways that we can encounter the risen Christ in our flesh-and-blood bodies. There are two which Christ commanded, and which are seen as necessary to salvation. Baptism is the way in which we enter the church, responding to God's offering of love by choosing to accept it. In baptism, our bodies are washed with water as our souls are cleansed by the Spirit of God, which comes to live within us, guiding us, urging us to make life-giving choices, leading us to serve others with the love that God has planted in our hearts. It is the sacrament of new birth, in which the water is a kind of amniotic fluid that nurtures us into resurrection life.

Eucharist is the soul's daily food, nurturing us with the strength and forgiveness that we need to continue in the life of Christ, healing us of the wounds which separate us from God and from one another. In communion, the bread and wine which we consecrate and taste and touch and smell somehow become the Body and Blood of Christ, who is among us, even if we do not understand how. Indeed, our inability to understand the mystery of Real Presence is itself, I believe, one of the ways the sacrament is sanctifying. When we come forward to receive the elements, we acknowledge our limitations, and put ourselves into right relation with God by obeying even when we don't understand.

In addition, the Church points to five other sacramentals, or minor sacraments: confirmation, marriage, reconciliation (or confession), anointing for healing, and ordination. Because each of us is different, and not every person is called to be married, or ordained, or healed, we do not have to participate in these to be saved. However, they offer us a means of lifting the stuff of our everyday lives up to God for renewal and blessing, so that everything we are can become touched by God.

But if sacraments are sign-acts, then, my friends, so are we. For most of the people we meet, *you* are the closest experience they will have to seeing, hearing, or touching Christ. Rowan Williams writes, "For a great many people, the burning question about faith is not just, 'Can anyone believe this?' but 'Can anyone live like this?' Is it possible to live 'in heaven', in such a way that our selfishness is eroded? To live on the basic assumption that people can be healed of their miserable compulsions to fear and resent each other and to cling to their grievances and injuries?" We are called to demonstrate, through our lives, that "another world ...has taken root in this one - only not just through the chance experiences of a few individuals but because something has happened once and for all to declare that sin has been dealt with, the prison of the self has been broken open by God. The impossible is now possible. Your life is hidden with Christ in God, and you live from a depth newly opened up in you. And the only way of saying that, of course is for it to be lived out. It's no use talking endlessly - preaching endlessly - about reconciliation and forgiveness and liberation. No argument can persuade anyone about this, only the lived reality."²

² Archbishop Rowan Williams, Easter Sermon, delivered at Canterbury Cathedral, April 12, 2009.

When you forgive another person, you show them grace is real. When you care for the sick, when you feed a stranger, when you welcome the homeless to a place of safety, when you offer to pray for someone, you show them the love of God. When you refuse to be vindictive, when you honor the gifts of the weakest person you meet, when you share what you have and give of what you are, when you compete with one another only in doing good, you demonstrate the presence of God, a God who can be touched and heard and seen and known -- not only two thousand years ago in Galilee, but here, today, now. You show that a new life is possible, that the gates of grace are open, that any who knock on those golden doors will receive more than they deserved or knew to desire.

St. Luke wrote of the first followers of Christ that “the whole community of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common....Great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, [for they] distributed to each as any had need.” (Acts 4:32-35) What would such a community look like today, a community in which the grace of Christ could clearly be seen and known? Let me show you a few snapshots.

When I lived in New Haven, I was friends with a doctor named Joy Burns. Inspired by the teachings of Christ and of the Buddha, Joy gave up a lucrative private medical practice to work out of a mobile trailer, supervising the delivery of medicine to homeless people who suffered from TB, AIDS, and mental illness. Her care for the poor was sign of new life.

Shane Claiborne spoke this week of a robotics engineer who used his gifts to develop robots which could locate and disarm buried land-mines. His creations are now being deployed throughout the world, making fields safe for children to play in. His work is a sign of the new life of Christ.

In Colombia, Iraq, Palestine, and Haiti, teams of Christian peacemakers interpose their own bodies “between the weak and the oppressor,” to demonstrate that the cross really is “an alternative to the sword.”³ Their work manifests the continuing presence of Christ among those whose lives are shattered by violence and suffering.

Whoever you are, whatever your calling, you can use it to ease suffering, to reduce need, to strengthen the faint-hearted, to reveal God’s grace in the world. You can embody the way of Christ, for God’s grace is in you, to strengthen you to do his will. A ninth-grader I know puts it like this: “A couple weeks ago I volunteered in a soup kitchen downtown, First Light, which serves women and children. I barely had to do anything but prepare and serve the food with other volunteers, but seeing the impact on the women was worth so much more. We provided them food which turned into the strength and energy they needed to turn around their lives. So maybe the food we served helped someone to obtain a job, to pay off some debt, or buy their child a toy they had been wanting. Jesus works so many miracles every second and every day. ...Our Lord put faith into thousands...and we can, too, by doing the simplest things. Even if it is giving an old suit to a poor man; that suit could help him find a job so he could feed his family. When you think of a simple favor you could do for someone, think of God’s unconditional love that He has for us, and create the opportunity for a miracle for someone else.”⁴

When you take that risk, when you live that way, when you create those everyday miracles, then those around you will be able to say, “We declare to you...what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.” (I John 1:1)

³ Ron Sider, speech delivered at Mennonite World Conference, 1984.

⁴ Douglas Logan, printed in *Into God’s Lap: Meditations for Lent 2009*, pp.118-119.