

28 June, 2009
2 Sam 1:1, 17-27; Ps 130
2 Cor 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

Rev. Deborah Meister

“After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag....David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan.” (2 Sam 1:1, 17)

If you were in church last week, listening to the start of the David story, you are likely feeling rather confused at this point. When we left off, David had just defeated Goliath and the Philistines in the Valley of Elah. Now, all of a sudden, he has been defeating the Amalekites, a different group of people, and King Saul appears to be dead. Certain questions arise: Is this the next day, the next week, the next year? How did Saul die? Who is Jonathan, and why is David so upset that he is dead? It is clear that we are missing a great portion of the story, and we are left struggling to make sense of the general outline from fragments.

Now, the missing pieces are, in fact, in the Bible. About twenty years have passed since the day David defeated Goliath. David becomes the darling of Israel, the best friend of Saul's son Jonathan. He elicits the jealousy of Saul, who drives him into exile and tries to kill him, while David attempts to demonstrate his loyalty to Saul. The whole thing is as good as a soap opera, but that's not what I wish to dwell on today.

The challenge we have been given, the struggle to make sense of this story from the mere fragments we hear on Sunday morning, is, in microcosm, the challenge of Christian life: how do we honor Christ in one another, how do we even perceive Christ in one another, when all we know of other people is fragments, the bits of their lives, of their personhood, that they allow us to glimpse?

My god-daughter Eve, who will turn three next month, began to take swim lessons last spring. Already, she has friends her parents do not know, experiences they did not share. A newborn baby whimpers and cries in his sleep from dreams he cannot communicate, an inner world that is hidden even while he lies at his mother's breast. He speaks of them when he begins to babble, but even then, he begins to shape the way in which he is known by what he reveals and what he chooses not to say. And as we age, the discrepancies grow: new schools, new towns, new countries, new jobs, new friendships -- each encounter shapes us until there is no one person who knows us entire. We are walking mysteries, secrets of God's grace waiting to be discovered by one another.

One of the most basic commandments in scripture is the offering of hospitality. Abraham and Sarah, Rebecca and Isaac, our patriarchs and matriarchs lived in a desert world, and in the desert, without hospitality, you die. The sandstorm, the dry water-skin, the cold of night -- all these can kill unless the stranger is willing to welcome you in. And yet, to welcome the stranger is a risky thing. It requires trust on both sides, trust that if you ask for an egg, your host will not give you a scorpion (Luke 11:12), trust that your guest will not harm you in the night. When Christ sent out his disciples with only a shirt and a staff and no spare sandals, he trusted that good people would be willing to take them in.

And yet, as basic as hospitality to the stranger was in the ancient world, it is only one facet of holy hospitality, for it can be as difficult to welcome the mystery who is our friend as it is to welcome any stranger. The gift in knowing someone is their very familiarity. We take comfort in the sound of their laugh, the color of their hair, the way they string words together, the old arguments and agreements we've rehearsed a hundred times. But still, there are parts of them we do not know. They may even change. When the child comes home and challenges her parents' views on race or politics or religion, when the friend who spent ten years as a peace activist suddenly accepts a job working for a tobacco company, when there is no major alteration of any sort, but a person we love

starts to rely on a person we do not even know, then we are challenged to remember that their heart is a mystery, and, when they let us into it, we are treading on holy ground.

Always, we are tempted to pin labels on one another. Always, there is the temptation to rush to judgment. We imagine back-stories, fill in the details we do not know from our own imaginations and then act as if they were real, or we flatten others out and treat them as if they were cardboard cut-outs instead of people. But to veer in either of these directions is to miss the Christ who lives in the other, the Christ who waits there for us to find him.

During his earthly ministry, Christ was always encountering strangers, intimate strangers whom he did not know on this earth, and yet who had been made by his hands. In today's Gospel, a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years sneaks up to Jesus in a crowd and touches the hem of his garment, believing that she will be made well. And Christ turns, knowing that power had gone out of him, and demands, "Who touched my clothes?" (Mark 5:30) And the woman hesitates, because a person with an issue of blood is ritually unclean. She was not allowed to be touching anyone at all, particularly not a teacher of God. But Christ keeps looking around, until she creeps forward, "trembling," and falls at his feet. And Christ does not condemn her. To the others in the crowd, she is simply unclean: that one aspect of who she is displaces all the rest of it. We who read this story do not even know her name. But to Christ, she is more. He calls her "daughter," this stranger he is meeting for the first time. "Daughter" creates relationship. "Daughter" is a human being, not just a wound. "Daughter" has faith as well as injury. "Daughter" can be made well.

Then Christ moves on, into the home of a young girl who is gravely ill. And when he gets near the door, people come out to meet him and tell him that she has died, but Christ continues on, saying, "The child is not dead but sleeping." (Mark 5:39) And the others laugh, but Christ takes her by the hand and raises her up, and urges them to get her something to eat.

There was life in the girl which others could not see. There is life in each one of us which lies hidden and deep, life which we cannot see except in Christ. We come to church to learn the art of reverence, but we practice in order to learn how to bow down to one another in awe. The real proving-ground of our faith is each person we meet, each one bearing toward us an image of God, if only we will slow down enough to welcome them, if only we will lay out a carpet at the door to our tent and welcome the mystery who comes to stand on it.¹

D.H.Lawrence writes,

What is the knocking?
What is the knocking at the door in the night?
It's somebody wants to do us harm.

No, no, it is the three strange angels.
Admit them, admit them.²

When David wept for the death of Jonathan, he wept for his closest friend (some say his lover) who had defied his father to save his friend's life. When David wept for the death of Saul, he wept for his most bitter enemy, the one who had rewarded loyalty and trust with persecution and acrimony and all the instruments of death. Saul had tried to kill David at the dinner table, driven him into the wilderness, driven him into exile. And yet, the last time they met, Saul cried out, "Come back, my son David, for I will never harm you again, because my life was precious in your sight

¹ I am indebted for this image to Renita Weems, *Showing Mary*.

² D.H. Lawrence, "The Song of a Man Who Has Come Through."

today; I have been a fool, and have made a great mistake.” (2 Sam 26:21) *Come back, my son...for I have been a fool.*

From time to time, it is given each one of us to see into the mystery of another’s heart. The clouds of our envy and fear part for just a moment, and we catch a glimpse of the goodness that lies concealed in the one we have judged, the one we have disliked, the one we have even sought to harm. We are given the chance to admit our error, to reclaim relationship, to kneel in reverence before the mystery of God who sends us angels every day, in the strangest guise. In those moments, we are on holy ground indeed.