

Seeing is Believing: When the Word Becomes Flesh

Ordination Service for Bill Freeman

Micah 6:6-8; I Corinthians 13; John 1:1-5, 14, 18

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us ... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. I John 4:12, 16

I am deeply honored to have been invited to preach Bill Freeman's ordination sermon. That Bill should have asked me is especially gracious and remarkable because, if he had listened to me about five years ago, we would not be gathered here to witness his ordination. I told him not to pursue the ministry. For a decade or so, I was a member of a Tuesday conversation that gathered at a little round table in a corner of Duba's bar. The center of the conversation was the incomparable Dr. Duncan Littlefair, whose penetrating mind kept us engaged in stimulating conversation. One day he said to me, "There is a guy who has hung around Fountain Street Church named Bill Freeman. He is thinking about the ministry and I don't think it's a good idea, but I told him to talk to you."

Well, this story moves around interesting times and places. A grand tradition each Friday before Christmas was a Christmas party at the Littlefair home. The choir, old and new, gathers and there is a wonderful Carol Sing preceded by good food and drink and social engagement. You don't really need an invitation; you just show up. It must have been about five or six Christmases past at Duncan's gala that Bill got hold of me and we found a narrow alcove where we could talk. He told me of his desire to enter the ministry - the feeling that this was something he felt compelled to do. I asked him why. I told him he had and was still making a difference through his media and communication skills. I suggested there were better ways for a person in his mid-40s to be involved in significant movements than going back to seminary and jumping through the hoops the institutional Church sets up for those who would become ministers of the Word.

And I tried to scare him out of the idea. To be sure, I was one of the lucky ones - a great congregation, a wonderful experience of over three decades. But, I told him of all the pain I saw in congregations and in pastors. I told him bluntly - it is a

tough business. This is not a good time for mainline churches or for pastors who would approach their task with critical intelligence and a liberal and open spirit

Bill listened attentively and then went on with his intention as if we had never spoken. And I'm glad he did. In ensuing encounters, both Dr. Littlefair and I became believers. This was not just some restless guy looking around for some new path to follow; no, this was a man yielding to an inner calling that was compelling him forward. Eventually, we said to him, "You have to do it!"

He has, and here we are today - his seminary diploma and United Church of Christ credentials in hand, and he will be ordained in the midst of a congregation that, in extending to him the Call to be their pastor, has confirmed that inward call that he felt five years ago.

Bill, I'm delighted you did not listen to me. I now know what you strongly suspected back then - there was something stirring in your life that was of the Spirit of God. The call of God is a mystery, but we know it when we see it. In you, we see it.

I have entitled my ordination sermon "Seeing is Believing: When the Word Becomes Flesh." "Seeing is believing" is a common phrase employed when a claim is made that is questionable. Another way to express one's doubt might be, "Show me," or "Prove it." Using this phrase, I'm thinking about the Church. I'm thinking specifically about the Congregational Church in Belding and I'm thinking, too, about your ministry, Bill. You may have a well-honed Mission Statement. There are confessional statements that have formed the United Church of Christ, and, of course, the whole Christian movement has been shaped by Scripture and the ancient ecumenical creeds that affirm the truth claims of the Christian Church. *But finally what really matters is the concrete life of this community and what is really critical for the execution of your ministry is the Word becoming flesh.*

There is a great theological tradition that reverses my claim. None less than the great St. Augustine and St. Anselm put it the other way around and you may recognize the Latin. St Augustine said, "*Credo ut intelligam*" - "I believe that I might understand," and Anselm's phrase was "*Fides Quaerens Intellectum*" - "Faith in search of understanding." Stated popularly, believe it and you will understand eventually. In this case, faith precedes reason; if you believe, you will come to see.

There has been a great philosophical/theological discussion down through the centuries and, frankly, I have loved being immersed in that conversation; I do not denigrate it. But, we live in a day that has seen the upheaval of the great theological systems and a challenge to all the great religious absolutisms in the respective world religious traditions. To continue simply to make claims with the counsel that if only one will believe, one will see and will understand is a losing enterprise.

Thus, Bill, on this your day of ordination, and Congregation, on this occasion of the ordination of your new pastor, let me suggest that you will *share a fruitful future as the Word becomes Flesh here and Belding sees and believes, believe that God's Spirit is in your midst and the grace of Jesus Christ is being lived out in your shared life.*

Let me root that claim in what I believe to be the central claim of the Christian faith as it came to expression in the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel that emerged from the Johannine community from which we also have the Letters of John. My text is from First John 4:12 and 16.

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us ... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

No one has ever seen God. That clear acknowledgment comes right out of the Gospel; you will find it in 1:18. And that acknowledgment also points to the deepest yearning of the human heart — to see God or to have one's life touched by God, by the deep Mystery of our existence. In John 14 we read that familiar statement of Jesus, "I am the way, the truth and the life ..." and then Jesus says, "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him," to which Philip responds, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied."

Have we not all at some time expressed that wistful longing of Philip -just show us! If only we could see, really see and know! And then Jesus comes back with that audacious claim, "*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*"

I am convinced this is the central core of John's Gospel. In the Prologue to the Gospel, 1:1-18, we have the theme set forth. The opening words remind us of the Creation Story - "In the beginning was the Word ..." and someone has translated that "In the beginning was the Divine Intention." And then in 1:14, "*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us ...*" or *the Divine Intention became flesh.*

That, of course, is that marvelous statement of the Incarnation - God become Human, for "Flesh" is synonymous with human.

Now, move to 1:18; there we have the acknowledgement we have already noted in I John 4:12- "No one has ever seen God." and now the writer goes on to express the incarnation in other words, "It is God the only son, who has made him known." And here again it is possible to translate the text in a most revealing way; the claim is that *Jesus is "the exegesis of God."*

I must point this out because Bill has just graduated from seminary where he learned the art of exegesis, that is, the art of interpreting the text — drawing

out the meaning of a literary piece. The Greek word behind the English "made him known" is *Exaeasis*. or *exegesis* in English.

But, we are not finished with our biblical foundation of my claim that seeing is believing when the Word becomes flesh. If we had only John's Gospel, we might think that God became human once for all in the humanity of Jesus, that incarnation was a once for all episode and, for those of us who have come after that once for all occurrence, the only possibility was believing, hoping to see. That is where the Gospel would leave us, as we can see, if we stay with the Gospel of John for a moment.

Remember the post-Easter encounter of the risen Lord and Thomas? Thomas had missed the Easter evening appearance of Jesus to the disciples. He didn't believe it. He said, "I won't believe he lives unless I can touch his flesh." Thomas was a "show me" person. But, the Gospel writer knows from that time forth "show me" persons were out of luck. And so, we have the encounter of the risen Lord and Thomas, in which Thomas is invited to touch the wounds of Jesus, the explicit statement that such tangible experience is less blessed than those "who have not seen and yet have come to believe." The purpose statement of the Gospel, John 20:30-31, is clear: It follows immediately the Thomas story.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But, these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, you may have life in his name.

There you have it. The Fourth Gospel gives us that profound portrait of Incarnation - "The Word became flesh," and the further claim that in that incarnation in Jesus we have the clue to the Mystery of God. The truth is affirmed, but for all who follow that episode of incarnation in Jesus, the only option is to believe it hoping thereby to gain life.

Precisely here the writer of the First Letter of John moves beyond the Gospel in a significant manner.

The Gospel: Believe and you will see.

The Letter: Love one another in concrete human community and you will see and experience the Presence and Grace of God.

Both writers acknowledge the same truth: "No one has ever seen God."

Both writers affirm the revelation of God in humanity - the Word become flesh.

But, here is the critical difference:

For the Gospel, the location of that revelation is in Jesus in the days of his flesh; for the writer of the Letter, the location of that revelation is the community of human love in ongoing human experience. Jesus is the Exemplar of what is universally true - we see God in the face of the other. So, when we fall in love and exclaim, "It is divine!" that is not hyperbole. It is true. For, God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Notice again the writer's intentionality: he does not say, as we might expect those who abide in God abide in love. Then again, we might throw up our hands and exclaim, how do I abide in God? Too often in the Church we get it backwards: cultivate the devotional life; worship regularly; give generously; live piously; love God. and you will know and you will find salvation. No, that is all backwards.

Love one another - Love the stranger - Love and the rest will follow; it is as simple as that!

I'm confident, knowing you, Bill, and knowing that this congregation has called you to be their pastor, that I am preaching to the choir. But, looking out on the wasteland of religion in these United States in our day, this elementary truth has been largely forgotten. I'm pleased to know in that vast wasteland there will be here an oasis of Grace, a concretion of Love, and Belding will see and believe.