

The Presence of God in the Face of Love

John 1:1-5, 14, 18; 1 John 4: 7-8, 12, 16

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God is Love.

Such a familiar affirmation; who would argue with that? Doesn't everyone believe God is Love? But so what? What difference does it make? What has that to do with the everyday reality we live?

God is love – has it become perhaps a cliché? It is one of those religious claims in the great traditions in one form or another which is seldom questioned but which too often remains a belief that has little real impact on the manner of our living. Hopefully we live in loving relationships in our families and our communities, but the human family remains divided – where would one begin the catalogue of current conflicts around the globe and the toxic atmosphere we live and breathe in our own nation destroys relationships and human community. One would never suspect that for the majority of us it is assumed that God is love.

And that may be why it fails to create loving community – it is a belief but too rarely a practice and good religion is not a matter of belief but practice. Perhaps that is obvious in a community like this but it is far from obvious in much of the Christian Church and I understand that from my own experience.

Perhaps the simplest way I can explain my own pilgrimage as a Christian and, indeed, a minister of the Gospel is to say I have moved from being a vertical Christian to being a horizontal Christian. Let me explain what I mean.

As a vertical Christian I understood myself as a child of God through Jesus Christ and “through Jesus Christ” meant through his death on the cross as an atonement for my sins, gaining thereby for me forgiveness and peace with God. Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world through his death offered as a sacrifice to God puts me in relationship with God. As it has been popularly expressed, Jesus took the rap for me. This is a vertical transaction – I, now with sins forgiven, am in relationship with God.

To be fair, the Heidelberg Catechism on which I was nurtured has three sections:

1. How great my sins and miseries are;
2. How I may be delivered from my sin;

and, thirdly, now moving from the vertical issue with God through Jesus' atoning death,

3. How I ought to live in gratitude for such salvation.

The third section deals with the Ten Commandments and The Lord's Prayer – the redeemed person lives a life of obedience and prayer and thus a Christian expresses in her life gratitude for salvation. Thus there is a horizontal dimension to the old scheme of salvation I've described as vertical, but such an understanding is first and foremost a vertical transaction between God and me.

I go into this in such detail because we are talking about two radically different understandings of Christian faith. The traditional, orthodox understanding in which I was nurtured, and which in the early part of my ministry I preached, was marked by God, wholly other and beyond us, who was the focus of salvation out of which was to flow a Christian life of obedience and prayer.

So what is the conception of Christian faith I've called the horizontal Christian understanding? It is an understanding of Christian faith as experiencing the God who is Love in the love of my brothers and sisters. Such an understanding begins with the affirmation – God is Love – and holds that God is experienced in the concrete love of another. Thus, not in a vertical event through Jesus' death as atonement opening Heaven's gates, but in the horizontal human relationships as the medium through which God is experienced.

Let me be clear; in moving to Scripture I am selective. The biblical case for the vertical conception of salvation and knowing God is strong. But there is another track and it is that track to which I would point you, a track I believe that has the potential to lift the claim "God is Love" to our attention such that we look for the experience of God in the face of our neighbor and trigger a chain reaction of love that has the potential to transform the human adventure.

My lessons are *John 1: 1-5, 14, 18* and *I John 4: 7-8, 12, 16*. *John 1:1* reminds us of *Genesis 1:1* – the creation of the Word (*Logos*) of God. Now the Gospel writer will tell the story of Jesus but roots that story in Creation, in Israel's history. So in *John 1:1* he says "In the beginning was the Word (*logos*).” Someone translated that as "in the beginning was The Divine Intention" – the Divine Intention to effect Creation. And then, to tell the story of Jesus, the writer in verse 14 says, "...the Word (*logos*) became flesh and lived among us.” The Christian Church speaks of this as the Incarnation; it is the Christmas story in a sentence.

The Gospel writer roots the Incarnation in the original creation and then declares that the Eternal Word became enfleshed, became human. Now the clue to the Sacred Mystery is in a human being. In the face of Jesus we get a clue to the Being of God. The writer acknowledges,

No one has ever seen God.

but he declares,

It is God the only Son...who has made God known.

That is the Good News of the Christmas Gospel – now we have in human form a clue to the Being of God. But it gets better: I read from John's First Letter because he picks up the theme and marvelously broadens it. He calls us to love one another because "God is love." He then picks up the Gospel writer's acknowledgement, repeating it:

No one has ever seen God.

It is at that point that the Gospel writer points to Jesus, the Word become flesh, in whose face we see God. But now in the First Letter of John, after repeating, "No one has ever seen God," this writer greatly expands the Gospel's claim. Now, not just the face of Jesus as the locus of revelation; now he writes, following the acknowledgement, "No one has ever seen God," that

If we love one another, God lives in us, and His love is perfected in us...God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.

(Note: not those who abide in God abide in love. No, rather amazingly, radically even, he says those who live in love live in God.)

Thus the title of my message: "The Presence of God in the Face of Love." In the Face of Love – the horizontal love of human to human – the Presence of God is known and experienced.

God is love.

God is known, experienced in loving.

Perhaps by now you are wondering if I'm going to tell you anything you didn't know and believe before you came. And maybe that is my point:

God is Love.

God is experienced as we love across the whole human community.

Ho hum....

And the whole human community continues with war, violence, and conflict.

Yesterday's *New York Times* had a long article about Israel's Defense Minister Ehud Barak's nuancing comments by his Defense Chief, General Gantz, who had seemed to suggest Iran's leadership was rational, thus seeming to strike a less

militant tone than has been that of Barak. As I read the piece my mind was full of the call to love and I realized anew the urgency of moving love out of the arena of personal relationships and into the arena of international affairs. If we don't, we risk ending the human experiment.

I'm reminded of James Carroll's *House of War*, in which he documents the rise of American Empire and the domination of Pentagon politics. It was in the wake of our use of atomic bombs over Japan in 1945 that Secretary of War Henry Stimson wrote a memorandum to President Truman. Carroll writes,

...less than a month after Japan's surrender, and just over a month after the detonation of the Nagasaki bomb, Stimson composed an urgent "Memorandum for the President," which began, "Subject: Proposed Action for Control of Atomic Bombs."

First Stimson told the president what the dawning of the nuclear age meant:

If the atomic bomb were merely another though more devastating military weapon to be assimilated into our pattern of international relations, it would be one thing. We could then follow the old custom of secrecy and nationalistic military superiority relying on international caution to prescribe [sic] future use of the weapon as we did with gas. But I think the bomb instead constitutes merely a first step in a new control by man over the forces of nature too revolutionary and dangerous to fit into the old concepts. I think it really caps the climax of the race between man's growing technical power for destructiveness and his psychological power of self-control and group-control – his moral power. If so, our method of approach to the Russians is a question of the most vital importance in the evolution of human progress...The crux of the problem is Russia.

Carroll comments further:

"To put the matter concisely," Stimson wrote, he proposed that the United States take immediate steps to "enter into an arrangement with the Russians, the general purpose of which would be to control and limit the use of the atomic bomb." He suggested that by bringing the Soviets into our confidence, they would have reason to believe it when Americans said that "we would stop work on any further improvement in, or manufacture of, the bomb as a military weapon, provided the Russians and the British would agree with us that in no event will they or we use a bomb as an instrument of war unless all three governments agree to that use." Give up the secret. Give up the monopoly. Give up sovereignty over use. Give up control of existing bombs. Stimson, in the cover letter that accompanied this memo, summed up his proposal by using the word "share" twice. (p. 113f)

Tragically Stimson's counsel was not heeded. Strongly against it was Secretary of State James Byrnes who stood adamantly against any attempt to cooperate with Stalin. Byrnes prevailed and the consequence was the long, costly and dangerous Cold War that caused us to live on the brink of disaster, living in terror of mutual assured destruction.

And not only the Cold War but still in the present, North Korea's saber rattling to say nothing of the threat of a strike on Iran and the potential for a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

One might respond regarding the Stimson Byrnes conflict that I'm operating with 20/20 hindsight. Not so! Rather that critical moment of history with its disastrous results was determined by two different mind-sets, two different spirits – a spirit of trust vs. a spirit of fear. Carroll points out that Stimson was fully aware of Byrnes' opposition to his position regarding nuclear weapons. Carroll writes,

Very much against Byrnes, in one of the most remarkable statements ever made by an American statesman, Stimson presumed to assert in his September 11 letter to Truman, "The chief lesson I have learned in a long life is that the only way you can make a man trustworthy is to trust him; and the surest way to make him untrustworthy is to distrust him and show him your distrust. (p. 114)

He speaks of trust. I am speaking of love but they are related. One who loves, trusts. In the reading from First John 4 we read in the 18th verse, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear..." A heart that loves enables trust and removes fear. We know that is true in our interpersonal relationships but, as the Stimson memo demonstrates, it is just as true in international affairs. It is universally true because God is Love and Love is God.

I lunch weekly with a friend, present here, and we speak of our lunches as our Wednesday Liturgy. Peter Hart has put me on the trail of some major works on this morning's reflection: Pitirim Sorokin's *The Ways and Power of Love* which, incidentally, relates his life work on the study of Love stimulated by the emergence of the Atomic Age; and Jeremy Rifkin's *The Empathic Civilization*, which claims it belongs to the core of the human to feel empathy for another human being rather than living over against, by nature aggressive, materialistic, utilitarian and self-interested, basing his claim on recent brain science and child development.

In the past few months we have engaged in an internet conversation with his philosopher- theologian brother Hendrik, on various subjects but, somehow or other, the nature of God is never far from the discussion, God as Love and the implications for our lives and human wellbeing. In a recent post "Henk" wrote "Reflections on Love and love" which emerged from our "conversations" via the

Internet. He introduced his reflection with reference to his loss of both a daughter and his wife as well as his own health:

My daughter Esther died of cancer the Tuesday of Easter week 2007. The moon was full. This year the Easter dates will be the same and the moon will again be full. My wife Anita died December 14, 2009, my birthday. In February my own cancer, almost forgotten, re-entered my life with a potential of death.

All of this came together in reflections that appeared in letters and then in a brief summary:

Reflections on Love and love
Hendrik Hart
Lent 2012

I have of late given much thought to ... the meaning of love and Love. I think that, at its core, a human life gains immeasurably in depth and scope when it is exposed to giving or receiving love as the primeval energy of all that is. Once we begin to be in the embrace of Love and begin to experience ourselves as vessels of love, we become aware of an irresistible energy that compels us to become centered, in all we do, in that energy; to seek for ourselves and others peace, justice, joy, life, fulfillment, patience, hope, life and much more. Love then begins to guide us in setting our priorities, distributing our energies, choosing our relationships, valuing our involvements and in so doing fills us with a blessed awareness that whenever and wherever we follow this guidance we find that, step by step but irresistibly, darkness recedes and light spreads. We become driven by a Spirit (Ruah, Wind, Breath) that blows where it wills and that without exception harvests light and life wherever it blows. The more we trust the Presence of Love in our life the more we ourselves become a presence of love in that Presence.

That expresses what I would affirm in this meditation: Love is at the core of reality, the creative center of the cosmos. The grain of the universe is Love. It is to love we are called every day in every way to one and all. It is the Way of Jesus for me, a very concrete way to which I am called, which I betray and fail miserably to fulfill. Yet a way I will not deny or rationalize away, a way I will self-consciously cultivate because it compels me. I choose that way and will not give up in spite of falling so far short. Love is the answer to the world's violence, to humanity's brokenness and finally Love will prevail because there can be no doubt, Love wins and in the face of Love I experience the Presence of God.

No one has ever seen God.

To dwell in Love is to dwell in God, for God is Love.

References:

James Carroll. *House of War: The Pentagon and the Disastrous Rise of American Power*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006.