

Love Enfleshed

Text: Hosea 11:8; I John 4:16; Luke 10:27

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
June 8, 1997

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Those of you who have been around a while with me know that I like to preach in series; it helps to focus my own thinking and reading and reflection, and it keeps you in a rut. But, there are those periods of time when I don't have a series and I just sort of spot things in, and then sometimes I find I am in an accidental series, and that's where I am right now.

I am fascinated with God and I think that happened when I began to reflect on Pentecost and thinking about the Spirit of God, in terms of the cosmos of which we are all a part, the fact that the Spirit of God is the Breath of God, that Breath of God that hovered over the Chaos of Creation's dawn, maybe 15 billion years ago, that Spirit or Breath of God that permeates the whole of reality, enlivening all that is, nothing existing apart from that inspiring, in-breathing of God's Spirit, so that the birth of the Church, the Jesus Movement that emerged into the Christian Church which we celebrate on Pentecost, is really not something new. It's simply another stage, another development. It is simply the continuity with that which has been true throughout all - the enlivening, permeating presence of God's breath, God's Spirit.

Then, we come to Trinity Sunday and we recognize that God is a Mystery, a mystery beyond our fathoming. The old theologian spoke about the incomprehensibility of God, that we cannot know God. On Pentecost, we experience that Mystery as an ever-present enlivening wind or breath, and so we have a Mystery and we have that permeating life-giving power force. But, how do we give some focus to it?

Then we discover a face, and in the face of Jesus we believe we see into the heart of God, so that that Mystery beyond our fathoming takes on some definition; the nature of that Mystery becomes concrete in that human form of Jesus who shows us the way to be in communion with that Mystery that we cannot touch nor grasp. And so, we have a face and an enlivening breath throughout all, lifting us to a Mystery beyond us.

Yet, we are meaning-seeking animals and that may be all well and good, but what does it mean for my life? We have those deep questions, because, as we have noted, the deep questions about God are really deep questions about ourselves. Whence have we come? Whither are we going? And what is the meaning of it, in the meantime? What does it mean for my concrete living today, in the concrete context of my life, this Mystery that is God that is focused in the face of Jesus and experienced as life?

Well, I think it just goes to show that there is something deep within us that wants to know, that needs to know about the meaning of it all.

The current issue of *Life* magazine has in bold print, "Why we are looking for the meaning of our soul in the stars," and then in bolder print, "The Rising of Astrology," and there is a rather main-theme article in that picture magazine about current stargazing and we are told that there is more interest in astrology today than in the past 400 years. The last period of time when there was a lot of interest in stargazing, palm reading, finding the alignment of the planets, was during the period of the Renaissance. And today, at this Post-Enlightenment era, when we have moved through all of the scientific discoveries and scientific methods and all of the rationality of the Enlightenment, we have a world that is more interested in stargazing than in the past 400 years. Well, that art goes back over 3000 years to Babylon and it's been with us ever since, some periods rather lean, some periods of popularity as at present, but it's amazing to me. People all over the globe are asking to have their destiny read out from the heavenly planets. We can scoff at it and laugh at it and yet, there's a rather fascinating tie-in with astrology and the concepts of modern physics.

One of Einstein's protégés, David Bohm, an English physicist and no mean scientist, has been very interested in the connection between the two. He speaks about cosmic reality as an unbroken entity inflow, and he speaks about matter and energy and meaning as the three manifestations of this unbroken flow of reality, and then he suggests that maybe there is that constant tug to check the stars because, after all, we are star children, we are stardust. He speaks of an implicate order of reality, an order which enfolds, intertwines - Bohm's word for the total interconnection of the whole of reality. Bohm uses an analogy - if one takes two glass cylinders, one fitting into the other, with just a little space between them, filling that space with some high-viscosity liquid, some heavy oil, and then into the oil drop a drop of ink, one can see that drop of ink through the cylinder walls. If the cylinders are spun in opposite directions, what happens to the drop of ink? It begins to make a circle around that cylinder, and if continued to be spun at a high rate of speed, eventually that line becomes thinner and thinner until it disappears and is actually absorbed into the liquid. One can no longer identify that spot of ink which once was so clear. Now, what happens if the revolutions of the cylinders are reversed, spinning in the opposite direction? Will the ink be gathered again, until finally it becomes that spot at which it began?

He illustrates that there is an implicate order of reality in which every spot of ink, every thing is connected with everything else in an implicate order beyond our fathoming. There is an explicate order that our senses can observe, and it is like observing the tip of the iceberg. With our senses, we have accessible to us the tip of the iceberg of reality. The rest is Mystery. But, it is one totality, one continuity, and it is manifested in energy and matter and meaning

So, the human person is an animal that asks deep questions. But, when we do that, it's not just an intellectual exercise. It is not an academic game. We are not playing with riddles for fun. We are asking the deep questions of our lives. What, then, does it mean to be alive, to be conscious, to be aware? What does it mean to be in relationship? What does it mean to be in community? What does it mean to be this human person caught up in this totality of reality? What does it mean for my life? Those are the questions that the Bible addresses.

The Bible is not a book of theology. The Bible is not about theological questions, about who can be saved and where heaven is and a multitude of other things that preachers talk about every Sunday. The Bible is a whole cumulative set of stories of concrete encounter with God. That's really what we want. We want to *experience* God. Knowledge is fine, but it is *experience* for which we hunger. The Bible tells about people who have shaped us in our tradition, who have had an experience of God and tell the story, and in telling the story, they draw us into the story and prepare us to experience similarly in our own stories, and at the heart of the biblical conviction is that confidence that God is love.

The title of the message in the liturgy is "Love Enfleshed," but I really didn't mean to write "Love Enfleshed." I really meant to write "Mystery Enfleshed." That's the way it appeared in the newspaper ads, and that's correct, because what I want to say is the Mystery that we cannot touch, we cannot fathom, the Mystery enfleshed, can be experienced. But, as a matter of fact, if John is right, who says God is love, then it amounts to the same thing. My point to you this morning is simply this:

To experience love is to experience God. Mystery enfleshed, Love enfleshed is the *experience* of God.

Hosea, the Hebrew prophet, has no equal when it comes to talking about the passionate love of God. The first three chapters of his prophecy which were not read this morning are about Hosea's own personal experience with an unfaithful wife who he has to bring back out of her unfaithfulness to a loving relationship again. Out of his own personal experience Hosea experiences the anguish of the heart of God over a people that God has loved but a people who turn their back on God, and so Hosea speaks of the marriage relationship as an image of the relationship of God and God's people. But, in the passage that was read, the image is that of a parent and a child.

When Israel was a child, I brought him out of Egypt. I picked him up, I held him in my arms, I brought him to my cheek.

The intimate, beautiful image of a parent and child, that deep, binding, bonding love - that is the image that Hosea has for the relationship of God to God's people. The child turns away and deserves to be cut off. And then, in the midst of that statement of the child's unfaithfulness, we hear these words:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim? My heart warms within me, my compassion roils within me. I cannot give you up! I will not give you up, because I am God, not human.

It would be human, it would be expected, it would be normal and natural to have you cut off, but I am *not* human; I am God, I am Love, I am passionate Love, I will not let you go!

And, of course, this is what John was talking about when he said God is love. But again, John wasn't talking about some speculative theological preposition that appears in a creed. John was talking about concrete human experience, for he says God is love, and the one who dwells in love, dwells in God. John says, the one who dwells in love, God abides in that one, and that one abides in God. If someone should say, "I love God," but doesn't love his brother or sister, that one is simply a liar, that one is not speaking truth, for John says you cannot love God whom you have not seen if you do not love the flesh around you, humankind that crosses your path.

Jesus is the supreme storyteller. (Ah, I hate to say this with my son here, but in Jesus' day also there were lawyers.) Lawyers who would put him to the test, so Luke tells us. And so, the lawyer says, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

But, Jesus is equal to the lawyer; he says, "Well, what does it say in the Torah?"

The lawyer says, "Love the Lord your God with heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus said, "Right answer. Go do it."

Ah, but lawyers. He begins to think about all of his neighbors and of the exhausting imperative, and, wanting to carve out a little more manageable space for himself, he says, "Could you define neighbor?"

Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, the religious people on their way to General Synod who didn't have time, and the outcast Samaritan who met the need of the person. Of course, Jesus won't answer directly; he makes the lawyer answer his own question.

Now, this is good. The lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus says, "Who was neighbor to the one in need?"

Nice twist, isn't it? I'm not going to go out there and tell you people who you ought to care for. I'm telling you that *you* are the person to care for any human need that crosses your path. It is in *doing* love that God is experienced. It is in the *practice of the faith* that the reality of God is known. It is in the *action of love* that the academic questions disappear and the reality of concrete human experience reveals God.

As I was reflecting on this last evening, my contemplation was broken by a call from below; it was Nancy. She is the sports fan of the family, and she said, "Would you like to see history for a moment?" Knowing that her husband is sick, she is very patient with me, but she did call me down with a minute, 40 seconds left, and I was going to say, after that experience, the discovery of God, the experience of God is winning the Stanley Cup. I really did think about it. I didn't admit this to her, but I really was thinking about the sermon when I saw those thousands of people made as one, in communion, in community, in a moment of exhilaration, of pure joy! I saw them *transcended* out of themselves, pulled out of themselves. They didn't think about any problem they had, any ache or pain or anything that was going on in their lives. For a moment they were transported, they were transcended into one rejoicing, jubilant community, and I thought to myself, maybe the temples of the 21st century are the great sports palaces that now punctuate this land, and maybe it is in the sports arena that God will be found in the future. You laugh, but I'm serious. But, then I thought, the Red Wings, let alone the Flyers, after that ecstatic moment, this morning are reaching for the BenGay and those celebrating fans missed worship and are taking aspirin, because, you see, as really wonderful as that ecstasy is, as that moment of pure joy is, it fades. But, if you've ever held a child, if you ever loved a woman or a man, if you've ever been able to touch and heal someone in need, if you had a moment of love, you've had the experience of God, and it keeps getting richer.

The Mystery is beyond us, but the experience is as close as the person at your side.