

Mystery, Manifestation and Community

Pentecost III

Text: Exodus 3:2; Mark 1:11; Acts 9:3

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Reflect with me for such a few moments about what we have done here this morning, what we have experienced. In the tradition from which I stem, the church at its worship is to be marked by word and sacrament. That is, word which gives explanation and the sacrament which is a visible demonstration of the meaning of the word. As we reflect on that, we will be doing what the sermon is intending to do - to reflect on the sacramental action in order that we might be reminded again or that we might have clarified for us who we are and what we are to be about. Before I proceed, however, let me remind you that two weeks ago was Pentecost and we celebrated the Festival of the Holy Spirit and we brought to a close that approximately six-month cycle in which we go through those marks of the life of Jesus' birth and life and death and resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

And then the Sunday following Pentecost is Trinity Sunday in the calendar of the Church, because at that point we are ready to reflect or to realize, perhaps, as never before the Trinitarian structure of our religious experience, that that Ultimate Mystery not at our disposal, that Ultimate Mystery that we call God, does break in or emanate from, become apparent to the likes of us in the arena of history. The Ultimate Mystery shows itself in some historical manifestation and that historical manifestation becomes the agent by which the mystery is revealed, at least to some extent, and a believer is engaged by the Spirit, for to look at that manifestation, some say "I believe," and others would say there's nothing to it. But, to look at that manifestation ... for example, to look into the face of Jesus and say, "My God," the Church has always recognized is the consequence of the Spirit of God; it is the gift of God. God reveals God's self, and so there is Ultimate Mystery, historical manifestation, and the concrete encounter of the individual, the believer who has the epiphany, who sees, who experiences the illumination.

Sometimes that illumination results in a message and a mission whose consequence is a community, a movement, a community of faith. Sometimes even a religion is born. But at this point on the Church calendar, we can see the trinitarian structure, not only of the nature of God, but the trinitarian structure of our own religious experience, an ultimate mystery, a manifestation of history, a

believing person through the Spirit who may become the nucleus of a community of a whole religious tradition.

I selected the scriptures I read in order to demonstrate that that is exactly what was going on with Moses. Moses, brooding in the wilderness, tending sheep. I love Chaim Potok's description of this moment in Moses' life. It's in the insert in your liturgy. Read it this afternoon. It takes a novelist to tell you what the Bible is all about, really, a great writer like Potok. You may say, "Well, he psychologizes that experience of Moses." Yes. How else? How else does it happen? Of course, and Chaim Potok is using his imagination, to be sure, but I think it's so moving, so powerful. There's Moses who has been raised with the knowledge that he is a Jew, but in the court of the Egyptians, lashes out in an heroic act or a dastardly act of murder, and flees from justice. He is in the wilderness tending the sheep with too much time on his hands to rummage it around in his mind – the gods of Egypt, slavery, murder, all of that - must there be some other god? Must there not be some other truth? And then one day a bush is burning and is not consumed and he hears a voice and it becomes a holy place, and Moses becomes the historical referent of that ultimate mystery and from Moses stems the nation Israel and the Torah whose roots are in Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and whose consequence is the history of Israel. Ultimate Mystery. Moment of manifestation. Community, religious community flowing therefrom by the Spirit of God.

It was no different for Paul. Paul, restless, serious, cantankerous, passionate, urgent, on the way to Damascus to stamp out that Way, maybe unconsciously because he felt it was such a powerful way, this way of Jesus, only to be blinded with light and turned around in his tracks, becoming now not the one who was out to arrest the followers of the Way, but the one who took that way and understood it after three years of meditation in the desert, understood the way of Jesus as Judaism for the Gentiles, who understood the way of Jesus as the universalizing of that which was intrinsic in Judaism, even though Judaism had been particular and local. Yet, Paul could see Yahweh was not a tribal God; Yahweh was the creator of the heavens and the earth. There was no other God. Therefore, in Judaism itself, in its particularity, in its understanding of the one true God, Creator of heaven and earth, was the invitation to the whole world. The grace that Israel knew was for a world, and Paul becomes the great founder of the Church.

Of course, it was with Jesus the same way, not really so different. When he joined the Baptist Movement, when he was baptized with John the Baptist, he was joining a revolutionary movement that was looking for the imminent incursion of God. He was looking at the horror of the historical situation, the poverty and the homelessness, the domination and the oppression and, in identifying with John the Baptist through his baptism, Jesus was identifying with that movement of social criticism that believed that somehow or other if God was just, God would have to do something. And he hears a voice and in the hearing of a voice, he gains identity and a mission, and he is driven out into the wilderness forty days and forty nights. "Who am I? Whence the voice? What is this all about?" And from

Jesus comes Paul, comes you and me, the community of faith that moves from that historical encounter with the word made flesh, who had face for the heart of the Eternal.

So, you see, that simply is the nature of religious experience. I marvel sometimes at my naiveté. I sort of always knew that there was this trinitarian thing, that God revealed God's self in Jesus and illumined our eyes by the Holy Spirit, binding us to Jesus who bound us to God. I knew that was a gift; I knew that was a revelation. But, I thought that it was the *only* true revelation and, if it's the only true revelation, you see, then anybody else who had a revelation has to be wrong. Then I came to see that every religion claims a revelation. There's no religion where someone sat down and said, "I think I'll think up a new scheme of things."

Mohammed had a vision resulting in the Koran. The Buddha had his pilgrimage and experience and illumination. Moses did. I even had to say in my naiveté that Moses, who was the historical agent of the Jewish faith and the tradition of Israel, wasn't understood by Moses' own people, because they didn't read it through the eyes of Jesus. I had relativized the Old Testament. I even had to claim that the Jewish people didn't understand their own book. Is that arrogance? It certainly was ignorance.

Now I can see the trinitarian structure of all religious experience, and I want to say that every community claims its story and every community that develops because of the authenticity of that story, that experience, develops its rituals and its sacraments, and every such community has a mark and that is what we did this morning at the baptismal font in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, baptismal water prayed over for the Spirit's movement, placed on the forehead of infants as a sign that they belong. We've all been baptized and that's what marks us; it is our union card, as it were. And then we came to the table because a community, to be a community, to have an identity, a sense of who it is, needs to commemorate, needs to come back again and again to its founding story, needs to come back to the table of our Lord, a table of Jesus where bread is broken and the cup is poured out as a sign of the violent death that this one experienced because of the way he lived, of the way he was, of the manifestation of God that he was. So we come back to this table in order that we might remember Jesus, in order that we might have fresh in our minds that face that reflects the mystery, the ultimate grace and love of God at the heart of things.

The sacramental character of the Church. We could use different symbols, different materials, we could enact it differently, but what we do has long history and deep meaning, and I want to say just two things in closing. One is that that is our way. That is a way. That is not *the* way. But, because it is not only a way, and our way, it *becomes* for us the way. Why should I play fast and loose? Why should I treat with nonchalance, why should I accord lack of importance to that baptismal font and that communion table just because it is not the only way? Because it is my way, and if it is my way, it is the way. While I look at another

who walks another way but experiences a similar grace, experiencing that ultimate mystery that is known here in baptism and in table and in preaching and in sacred dance, hear me again - our Christian way symbolized in baptism and table is a way. It is not the only way. But, since it's our way, for us, the way, and it's full of grace and wonder and beauty, and I love it very much.

Then, I would say this, although it is not the only way, although it is one way, if it is good and true and beautiful, then it is worth the passion of my life to keep the community that has grown up around it alive and healthy. Then it is worth the engagement of my life to keep a community like this alive and well, with a strong sense of identity, knowing its tradition, loving the life to which it is called. If it is my way, if it is for us the way, then it deserves the passion of our lives.

We've had a lot of funerals here lately and just last Sunday in this place we buried Betty Hofstra, 88 years, a beautiful saint of God. She was the fourth generation, the daughters and grandchildren and the great grandchildren. And because it was Sunday and they didn't open the grave, nonetheless, I went to the cemetery with the family and there, particularly the fourth generation, the little ones took yellow roses and stood around the gravestone where Great Grandpa Oscar was marked. It was a beautiful experience with beautiful children remembering their Great Grandma in the presence of the grave of their Great Grandpa, sanctified by prayer. How else do you give sanctity to human life? How else do you celebrate the death of a saint? How else do you give adequate value to a newborn? At the moment of birth at the gift of a child you want to pray, you want to sing, you want to dance, because life is pregnant with the holy if only we have eyes to see, if only we pause long enough, if only some place along the way there is a community of people with whom we can join in order to celebrate birth and death and the commemoration of the heart of our story.

It's been quite a weekend. I married a daughter, baptized a grandson whose father I baptized, and as we speak, a sister is being operated on in emergency whose consequence will be serious cancer, I'm sure. Now, how do you do that unless there is a God before whom one can kneel, before whom one can pause and be still, before whom one can know that ultimately all is grace and all will be well? Why in the world, if this is a way, even if it isn't the only way, need I treat it nonchalantly? Should I denigrate it? Why can I not be passionately engaged in it because it's not the only way, but, by God, it's good. It's good.