

Lent 4
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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Rev. Paul Moore

A Long, Loving Look at the Real

How do you get at something for which there seems to be no direct path?

William McNamara tells an engaging story in his book, *Mystical Passion*.¹ He was visiting a friend's house when someone rang the doorbell. Three people were at the door, an older couple, and an attractive young woman. They were selling religion, and the older couple was training the young woman. They were invited in, and Brother William listened attentively as the young woman gave her spiel. When she was all done he said, in the most innocent of manners, "Gosh, you're beautiful!" With that the older couple scooped up the young lady and hustled her out the door! He saw her as she was, and not as the couple wanted her to be seen.

The other day I was discussing art and its creation with one of our resident artists. We were talking about the book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*,² how sometimes it is helpful to turn a picture upside down and copy it. Visual artists, it seems, see the world differently. They see it as it is, and not how we think it ought to be, and the art of learning to draw is a practice in learning to see.

Our Buddhist friends call it "enlightenment," to see the world as it is, with no preconditioned grids, filters or mirrors.

Today's lessons speak to it. In the first lesson Joshua has led the people into the Promised Land. They have conquered and possessed the land, and they have peace on all their borders. That year they eat of the first fruits of the land. They are settled. Since the formative process of the Wilderness Wanderings is over the food of the Wilderness stops. Not only do they no longer need manna, but they have come to a new place. Life returns to "normal." This is the way the world really works. Manna is an exception, a divinely appointed provision in their time of need. Like Sunday School, and what St. Paul calls "the milk of the word," for newborn babes in Christ, it supplied what was needed at the time, but now, they are ready for real food. Real food looks a lot like Egypt, only it's not. Now this band of slaves is a free nation with their own territory, story and family. If they plant they will reap; if they do not plant they will not reap. The world will be what it is with them, no special provisions, no special privileges, just exactly what it is. The Promised Land is a place of spiritual maturity.

In the Gospel lesson we see something similar. We call this parable the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but it's really the Parable of the Loving Father. The love that this Father expresses is an expression of his ability to see things as they really are. One way to read the story is in terms of the education each of the two sons' experiences. The younger son messes up, there's no doubt

¹ McNamara, William. *Mystical passion: spirituality for a bored society*. Paulist Press, 1977.

² Edwards, Betty. *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. ACM, 1997.

about that. He ends up out doing what no self-respecting Jew would ever have stooped to do—feeding pigs! He is hungry—and that was all the work he could find. He decides to go home and get work with his father. “I am not worthy to be your son,” he will say. “Let me be as a hired hand.” The older son messes up, too. He sees the mess his older brother has gotten himself into. He would rather agree with his brother that he is now no longer worthy to be called a son. He might not even be so sure that there should be work for scum like him at a nice establishment like this. But the father cuts through all that. Both of his boys do not see things as they are. The reality is that both of them are his sons, and they are brothers. This is the first and foremost truth that puts all the rest into perspective. To one he says, “Welcome home,” and to the other he says, “Come inside.”

Paul names the experience. He says that in Christ we are new creations. The old has passed away, the new has come. The old way of seeing things has ceased to be adequate to the task. The new is transforming the way we live. Old to New: How do you get at something to which there is no direct path? The path does not lead in logical steps from here to there. The path ends, and then picks up again somewhere else.

This is why in the first installment of this Lenten sermon we noted that the dualistic mind cannot get to where we need to go. O, it's good for some things, for sure, society depends on it for order and health, but it's just not adequate for true selfless love. To try to get where we need to go is an exercise in guaranteed failure. In the second installment we talked about unitive thinking as another way of comprehending the task, not as a memorized sequence of actions, but as seeing the lay of the land, the broader, higher perspective, that sees in each person, situation or condition the exceptions to our ego's categories, and learns to love as God loves us. In the third installment we talked about how love transcends the categories. Richard Rohr, our teacher, says that we only learn to think unitively through great love or great suffering. We also saw that these two often go together, that real love requires real suffering, and that suffering is worth it for the sake of the love.

Now we are confronted with the gap between the rule of the ego and the life of the Spirit. This is the gap between the present reality as the world sees it, and the truth of the Kingdom as God sees it. The only way over this gap is grace. Grace is a gift, nothing accomplished or earned. Ultimately grace is the greatest news anyone can ever hear. Crossing the gap does not require a blind leap of faith. The mystics of our tradition and every tradition speak in unison. The humble surrender is not a psychotic break with reality. A psychotic break is a launch into a fabricated world disconnected from reality. Humble surrender is a long, loving look at the real.

A long, loving look at the real:

Long: Last June my siblings and I took our parents' ashes back to Ecuador to bury among the Tsachi people. We then traveled around the country visiting old haunts and new. One such trip was to Mindo, where I paid an ungodly sum to a guide to go see the spectacular Andean Cock of the Rock. It is the size of a large pigeon, with a stunning crimson body, black and silver wings and a half-moon crest covering its bill. When we saw them I couldn't get enough of them—I just

kept staring. One does not merely glance at what is important. One takes time to look carefully. One who looks carefully is invested, but not with any agenda to change. One merely wants to approach the essence of what is real.

Loving: I have been married to Karisse for going on 38 years. I know her like no other human being does. Now the desire and the appreciation are 38 years stronger than at the beginning. I am learning to love her for who she is and not for what I wish she were or am afraid she might be. The loving look is engaged but not judgmental, preconceived or manipulative. It is invested in the reality of what is seen.

Look: When Karisse and I we first started dating I loved to look at her. It meant that we were close to one another, or at least within communication distance. It is still true, and my favorite view is her face inches away from mine. When we look lovingly we do not turn away, we do not stop our ears or pull back our hands. We want to engage.

The Real: On that same birding trip in Ecuador we heard a Golden-headed Quetzal. It would have been a spectacular addition to my life list, but it would only call from the misty treetops just out of sight. “Shucks and shootles,” as Karisse would say, but that’s what makes birding what it is: You see what is there, and not what is not there. The real is what is there, not what we think should be there, or what we are afraid might be there. It is what it is, and it ain’t what it ain’t.

What is real is important, because God makes that which is real, not that which is unreal. God reveals the divine heart through and in what is real. The Real is a Sacrament of the Ground of our Being. The long, loving look at the real is what William McNamara did with that young woman. A long, loving look at the real describes the eye of the artist. A long, loving look at the real is what Buddhist zazen is all about. A long, loving look at the real is Christian contemplation. It is the discipline we can engage to prepare ourselves for the gift of grace.

Here is your fourth Lenten discipline:

- The first was to surrender the rule of the ego
- The second was to look for the bigger picture.
- The third is to embrace the pain for love's sake
- The fourth is to take a long, loving look at the real.