

Epiphany 2
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

January 17, 2016
Rev. Paul Moore

Transforming Love

It was a simple mistake. I was going hunting. I grew up with a people who hunted and fished for most of the meat in their pots, and I learned from them. I had a little single-shot bolt-action .22 rifle. I had measured out a precious few rounds to use, since they were so expensive, and I was waiting to either hitch-hike or ride the bus to my favorite spot.

As I stood there waiting for the opportunity of transportation a policeman sauntered up to me. "Let me see that gun," he said. Then, displaying a horrendous ignorance of firearms, he claimed that this was the kind of rifle used to assassinate John F. Kennedy. If you know anything at all about Latin America, you know that John F. Kennedy, the first Catholic president of the United States, was enormously popular. His death was mourned all over the continent. Such an accusation was serious talk!

What I didn't know was that in capital city far, far away there had been a military coup that replaced the sitting president with a junta of generals. The whole country was on pins and needles, and I displayed enormously ignorant of the political winds that were blowing!

The upshot was that he walked me down to the local police station. When he found out who I was someone called my dad. My dad had done the wise thing in Latin America, and had cultivated a friendship with the chief of police. Soon I was riding back home, dangerous firearm under wraps, having promised to stay low and not show the controversial item until calmer days ruled. The lesson of the day came through clearly. In Latin America, *"el que no tiene padrino no se bautiza."* *"He who doesn't have a godparent can't even get baptized."* It's not what you know or how you follow the rules, but who your friends are. It's true in Ecuador 40 years ago, and throughout the whole, wide world, even in these United States.

I find it kind of funny, then, that the only place this doesn't seem to apply is in Church. We still think of God as the great judge who will meet out justice at the end of time—or earlier if you're particularly unlucky. Unconcerned, disconnected, distant and usually angry at us, this god's main currency is guilt, and he's darn good at accruing debts and demanding payment! The Bible's picture of God includes some of that, to be sure, but the vast majority of images are much softer, much more human. In her commentary on the Song of Songs, Ellen Davis writes,

“That the Old Testament represents God chiefly as angry judge and vicious warrior is a false stereotype. These images are not absent, but they are more than balanced by striking portrayals of God as lover or husband, infatuated with Israel beyond all reason or deserving. God is not too proud to grieve terribly over Israel’s unfaithfulness, or to be giddy over her return home. These “undignified” portrayals reveal that Israel’s covenant with God, like human marriage (which is also designated by the word “covenant”; see Mal. 2: 14), is only secondarily a legal arrangement. Its primary quality is love at the highest pitch of intensity.”

Davis, Ellen F. (2000-05-01). Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs (Westminster Bible Companion) (Kindle Locations 4889-4894). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

Today's readings, all of them, show a softer side of the divine heart. Isaiah reminds the people of God that God will vindicate her, and call her "married." The Psalm promises a caring, loving God. St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, shows how the Spirit of God equips the church for her work, and the Gospel gives us that great image of Jesus at his first miracle—at a marriage feast in Cana. Michael Card wrote a song about this event in Jesus' life:

So amidst the laughter and feasting,
 There sits Jesus full with the fun
 He has made them wine because He is longing
 For a wedding that's yet to come.

The Wedding, Michael Card, 1985.

He is referencing the Marriage Feast of the Lamb in Revelations, chapter 19, the image of the final consummation of all things.

God woos us, sisters and brothers. The Ground of our being chases after us, trying to get us to turn and look at the divine face. We call judgment down upon ourselves when we turn away, for we turn away from our only source of true life, like a drowning man who swims away from the life-saver thrown to him—but this is not the desire of God. God loves us so profoundly that the divine heart is just not happy until we are in a loving, mutual relationship with God, personal, transforming, and shared.

How can we best respond?

Personal: This study program from which I just returned is very personal. It is meeting my needs for stretching my mind and expanding my horizons. What I am learning is challenging to me as a Christian and as a person. It has changed my thinking in some regards, and confirmed my thinking in other areas. It has given me friends in far-away places, people with whom I compare thoughts and feelings and experiences, who enrich

my life. Even if I were not your rector, this would be a beneficial program for me. It has also proven to me that I "can do it." There are always those niggling doubts about one's capacity...at least for me, anyway, but I find I hold my own, and that is very affirming. It is very personal.

Our walk with God is personal. It's not intended as something that merely labels you a good person in society, or even particularly a religious person. It is meant to have an impact on how you think and feel and act. It begs the question: How would you live your life differently if you did NOT have a conscious relationship with God? If you can't answer that one in any definitive way, then there is a God out there who is eager and desirous of another way of living with you, not incognito, but fully present to you, some-One who becomes more important than anything else in your life, some-One who puts all other things in your life in their wisest and most compassionate perspective.

Transforming: This study program is transforming for me. Our Old Testament readings have opened up this half of the Bible in ways I never imagined. The Old Testament is truly sacred history, the record of how people have related to God and understood their relationship with the ultimate through many times, places, conditions and experiences. This new understanding has fleshed my understanding of Jesus, the core and anchor of my faith. Jesus, after all, was a person in a given time and place. Jesus was not a Christian, Jesus was a Jew who lived in the heritage of the Jewish faith as it was lived in his day, yet transformed it and transcended it as well. This expanded way of understanding Jesus lays the foundation for getting a bit of a handle on how people have lived out their lives with Jesus through the centuries in different places, times and cultures, rooted in different understandings of the way the universe is supposed to work, and all Christian to the core. The history of the Church is almost as varied and colorful as that of the Hebrews as we see reflected in the Old Testament. On the basis of that we can begin discussing what our options are in today's world, to confront the challenges of this day, faithful to the tradition, and availing ourselves of its vast and varied resources. Our walk with God is transforming.

Our mother Eve imagined that she could make life-determining decisions outside of her relationship with God and get away with it, that she could play at being her own god. See where it got us? A breach in the relationship with the ground of our being is a breach that splits the very soul apart. It alienates us from God, from ourselves, and from the rest of the created order.

The difference between walking through life without a conscious relationship with God and walking through life WITH a conscious relationship with God is the difference between finding yourself in a third-world prison with all its horrors, and being able to go

home with Dad at the end of the day. One's relationship with God is the key to knowing how to live wisely and compassionately in today's world.

Shared: When the Vestry was discussing the possibility of me starting this Doctor of Ministry program one of the members asked me, "What effect will this have on your preaching?" I assured him that I hoped it would enrich, deepen and inspire my preaching and teaching. I have been very aware that you all pay a price for this. I am away, I have extra demands on my time, etc. I have worked diligently to bring you all along on my studies, to share with you in sermons and teaching times what I am learning, and why it is important to me, and to us. I have tried to share.

Our lives with God are personal and they are transforming, but they are not intended to be private. They are to be shared. One of the popular things today is to be spiritual but not religious, but that is like being a note and thinking you are a song, like calling yourself married without a spouse. Without context none of our walks with God mean much of anything at all. That is why over the centuries people of spiritual interests have banded together into communities of faith. That is why the "we" is as important as the "I" with God.

There are two levels at which we share. First, we share with those of our own community of faith. Gathering together weekly is important to you, yes, but your presence here is as important to the rest of us as it is to you. The writer of Hebrews admonishes us not to abandon the gathering of the assembly.

Then we share with those who are not of our community of faith. People all around have a walk with God. Sometimes it is conscious, sometimes more incognito. There are differences and there are similarities with your own walk. Sharing, telling your stories of God in your life, and listening to those of others enriches your own walk and theirs as well. With those whose relationship is more incognito, who knows? You may awaken them to faith!

The divine heart of love seeks us out. God wants to share our lives and our living, wants to transform them through that sharing, and wants us to live that transforming love out into our world.