

March 30, 2014
Fourth Sunday of Lent

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1 Samuel 16:1-13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

“For the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

I had a class in seminary, as I was preparing for ordination, in which we talked a lot about angels. Angels are creatures of God that are spiritual beings. And as I learned in this class, one characteristic of angels is that their relationship with God is utterly transparent.

Angels have a choice, they can turn towards God and love and follow Him. And if they do, their whole beings are suffused with God’s light. They are utterly light, and brightness, and glory. They turn to God and His light rushes into them, fills them, and so when they make themselves known to humans, they appear to us with amazing brightness, like lamps burning with the light of God.

But it is a choice. Other angels choose to turn away from God. To reject His love, or His glory, or His authority over them. And these angels, which we call the fallen angels, or demons, are utterly darkness. The light of God is absent from them, and so they are empty.

Humans, too, can turn toward God or away from Him. But for us it’s different. Whether this is a blessing, or a curse I’m not sure, but we have degrees of turning. It is not all or nothing for us. And so each of us can perceive in ourselves, and probably in others, a little light and a little darkness. Variations in the degree to which we turn toward God.

Being a disciple, a follower of Christ, is to a large extent the gradual training in turning more and more toward God, toward the light. So that one day we might be able to live into the words of St. Paul which we heard in today’s Epistle when he says:

“Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.”

Not just filled with light, in the language of Paul. He says that as beings joined to Christ, as the body of Christ, we *are* light! Light, in the image of God, who is light.

What a lovely thought. Sometimes this image really inspires me and makes me feel able and ready to walk my path guided by the light of Christ. I feel like I could recognize light, goodness, and love as guides to how I should act. I feel that God's love could guide the disposition of my heart and mind and thus guide my actions.

But other times I wonder - how do you recognize the path of light? Is it always easy to identify?

It's not impossible! It's not without clues, such as St. Paul offers us, saying: "Live as children of light - for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true."

And we have some sense of that. We have the light of wisdom in our hearts, to recognize the most clear good and evil things.

But shades in the middle between perfect good and evil, light and dark - mixed things like our own selves - are harder. But we can make a good effort to "Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord."

In fact, I think that the effort, the trying to follow God's path, walk in in his light, is actually a central part of how we find the path. I find deep comfort and guidance in a prayer attributed to Thomas Merton, a Trappist Monk, which speaks about this trying to follow the path God has set before us, and gives some wise insight into our limitations, but also gives an account of our hope. His prayer to God on this subject goes like this:

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

Thomas Merton's prayer speaks about the challenge, the uncertainty of being a disciple and trying to follow Christ faithfully. When we are honest with ourselves, it's not always easy to know how to do that.

Our Gospel story today also talks about discipleship - in the language of light and darkness - sight and blindness. The blind man who is healed by Jesus seems to become a disciple in an instant - he never even questions whether he should follow Jesus. His only question is whether the Pharisees and others in his community would like to become disciples too!

The Pharisees turn him down and "revile" him. Which is what we have come to expect from Pharisees. But I think we can hear and condemn the doubt and resistance of the Pharisees too easily. They themselves were trying to follow God faithfully. But Jesus so often finds fault with their efforts. What shall we make of that?

For one thing it is a profound warning to us. The Pharisees were deeply holy people. They loved God. They gave generously to neighbors and often deprived themselves. They were respected and loved by many people. Jesus himself praises the Pharisees' righteousness, and then he tells his disciples that, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

One big thing that we can recognize as a flaw in most Pharisees mentioned in Scripture is pride. Jesus accuses them of hypocrisy - in large part because they try to show off their holiness or make themselves seem more pious than they are. And perhaps they are ignorant of their own sinfulness, or unwilling to see it.

Thomas Merton's prayer counters that kind of pride with a radical humility. He says, "I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so."

Merton's prayer humbles our pride. We may be doing it all wrong. We may be blind to our own hypocrisy and sin.

But one hope we are offered right away is that when we acknowledge that we all have areas of hypocrisy and sin, we can look for them piercingly. We can examine our own motivations, words, actions, thoughts, rationalizations more critically. We can be ready to see where we might be lying to ourselves.

And then there is the great hope that Merton continues with. He says to God, "But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire."

Jesus spoke a great deal about the heart. He spoke a great deal about love for God and neighbor. About hearts that desire to love God and please him.

He spoke a great deal about showing that love in actions! But there is a deep focus in Christ's words on the motivation behind the action. Jesus warns us that doing the right thing for the wrong reason isn't pleasing to God - this is the hypocrisy Jesus condemns! It is storing up treasure on earth, trying to win human praise instead of focusing on serving God.

But instead we can turn our hearts and desires to loving God and seeking to please Him in all we do. We can turn to loving Him and our neighbor. To loving him *in* our neighbor. To serving the least of His brothers and in such actions serving Him. We can try to always do this in the spirit of loving God and seeking to please him.

We won't live up to that goal. We will often do serious wrong, and we will often act out of selfishness instead of acting for the love of God. But we can keep recommitting ourselves to it. We can keep turning back again and again, little by little, toward God - looking for Him as our source of light and guidance, and recognizing His presence in us when we turn toward Him with love and feel our hearts fill, grow just a little, with love. That love that can be our guide and our light.

Loving God is practical. Repenting or returning to God in prayer, when we have sinned or when we have grown distant from God - these things are practical. The Christian faith is not about do! do! do! in order to do enough to please God or climb our way to heaven - to earn our salvation. We can never earn it, and anyway it has already been obtained for us by Jesus as a gift.

But we can delight in that gift. We can seek to live in a gratitude and love for God that can then flavor all our actions. So that we can serve him without a constant anxiety or fear about whether it's enough. Instead, we can trust that *God's* love for *us* is enough, and that when our hearts respond with love, God *will* guide us.

Moments of prayer, of repentance, of turning back to God help guide us. Such moments help us achieve that constant refocusing on trying to do nothing apart from the desire to please God. These moments are reminders of God's presence with us. God's presence and love that help teach us, little by little, to believe the words that Thomas Merton first prayed, saying:

"And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

Amen.