

“Holy Mysteries”
December 23, 2007

Micah 5:2-5a; Matthew 1:18-25

Many of you, I think, have noticed that I love words. I love to read, I love to write, and I can even say I’ve come to love standing up here regularly and uttering quite a few words ... perhaps, on occasion, a few too *many* words.

So I love words. Words are a gift. Human language is rich with beauty and nuance and the power to communicate. But, still, words and language and the ways we use them all have their limits, and they can never fully convey the deepest truths of our lives.

As an example, take the word “love.” I’ve already said I love words. But they’re not the only things I love. I love God. I love Chey. I love this congregation. I love sushi. I love dogs. I love chocolate. And I love snow, even though admitting that last one exposes me to no end of ridicule around here!

Every one of those statements is true. I do love all those things, but there’s no way that I mean the same thing each time I use the same word, “love.” The feelings and relationship I’m describing when I talk about loving God or loving Chey are not the same feelings and relationship I’m describing when I talk about loving sushi or chocolate ... or, at least, they’d better not be the same, because, if they are, you all might want to think about looking for a new minister, someone who understands the difference between loving the Spirit of Creation and loving raw fish.

So how do I or you describe and explain the difference between loving God and loving sushi or the difference between loving your spouse and loving dark chocolate? One way would be to talk about what you’d be willing to give *or to give up* to stay true to that love and the relationship in which it grows. For instance, loving God can mean giving the fullness of yourself to the practices of prayer and discernment, while loving sushi usually means simply giving some of the fullness of your wallet to the sushi bar owner. Loving your spouse means giving up and letting go of the life you would have had if you stayed single, while loving chocolate can mean giving up cheesecake to make room for the joy and the calories of chocolate.

There’s another way to explain the different experiences we’re talking about when we use the word “love,” and that’s to tell stories. To tell you what I mean when I say I love Chey, I can tell you about one of the times I’ve looked into her eyes and seen the whole world. To describe what it is to love *God*, everyday mystics – and that can include you and me, my friends – tell stories of being on fire with a longing to feel the presence of God, stories of being overcome with the need to love God by loving a stranger or an enemy, and stories of feeling ready to do anything or go anywhere to be a part of God’s healing work in the world.

And there’s something very interesting in this kind of story, the kind of story we tell to describe some of our deepest experiences. These stories are true stories, but they don’t usually hold up very well against any test of literal, factual “truth.” When I tell you that I’ve seen the world in Chey’s eyes, I’m not saying that I’ve seen Shanghai or Mt. Everest or even the Golden Gate Bridge ... but I *have* and *do* see the whole world in her eyes. And when you or I or other everyday mystics say they’ve been on fire with their

love of God, they're not saying that they would have been able to light the Advent candles without matches ... but they have been and are on fire.

These are *true* stories; they point to the extraordinary truth below what we often think of as our very ordinary lives. This kind of story refuses to be confined by the limits of language or the ordinariness of words. This is the kind of story that tells a truth much deeper than provable fact. This is the kind of story that tells – or at least *points to* – a truth beyond the ability of words to describe.

And this is precisely the kind of story that surrounds us, embraces us, feeds us, and blesses us this morning. This morning, the last Sunday of Advent, is the morning we hear the story of the virgin birth and then gather around this table to tell the story of the living Christ in our midst.

The Gospel of Matthew is telling us that God has come and *still* comes to earth in and through human flesh. Matthew takes the birth of a child – something that is literally an everyday, although remarkable, event – and he invites anyone who's willing to listen to realize that there is nothing everyday or ordinary going on here. He invites anyone who's willing to listen to realize that God was and is present in the birth of Jesus in a way that human language can only hint at. Through this story, Matthew – and God – are inviting us to realize that the healing, loving, living presence of God comes to us through the gift of life itself.

The story of the virgin birth may be one of what Mark Twain called the “twelve unbelievable things” Christians have to “believe before breakfast,” but arguments about believability miss the point. This story isn't about who did or didn't have sex with whom, before or after marriage. It isn't about *sex* at all. This story is about the fullness of the presence of God in Jesus, and it's about the fullness of the presence of God in us. The story is about the God who comes to us in our daily lives, the One who loves us and claims us before we're even born.

The story we'll tell and re-enact around the communion table in a few moments is also about the God who comes to us and loves us and claims us. The story of the Last Supper reveals God's love, as Jesus breaks the bread, shares the wine, and tells his disciples that he gives them his life and love. It's a story that reveals God's love in a gathering of people who hadn't even known each other until recently. It's a story of people who were, in varying degrees, willing to give themselves in loving service to one another and to the world. (In other words, it's a story of people like you and me.) And it's a story that invites us to realize – and to *trust* – that when we gather and offer our love and our very selves to one another, God is in our midst, present in the food and drink we share and present in the love we have for one another.

Through the words that tell these stories, through finite human language that points to the infinite, we're invited into the love of God that surpasses human understanding and language. In the conception and birth of a child, in the gathering of brothers and sisters who were once strangers, in the willingness to love and to give of ourselves, God is at work, creating and offering a life of blessing, healing, and hope.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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