

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Third Sunday of Epiphany (year B)

January 15, 2006

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Even Greater Things Than These!

Text: John 1:43-51

“You will see greater things than these, Nathaniel.” Nathaniel did in his lifetime with Jesus. God worked wonders! And we are heirs to that same promise –the promise of moral hope in which is embedded justice and peace for the whole world. It is a great vision that has motivated many in whom God has been pleased to make her epiphany, her appearing in their lives.

In our season of Epiphany, in our contemporary world, the indifference of secularity has clouded the vision. As it was put so well in the Hebrew reading this morning: “The Word of God was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” Nothing characterizes our world so well today as the loss of vision and the loss of a sense of the presence of God. There is no compelling God-word and even less vision.

One of the major causes of this famine of the living bread of life is the widespread notion that all truths are relative. This is a corollary to the existence of truth in other religions. If there are other religions with their values and truths what are we to make of ours? From this, it follows, albeit incorrectly I assert, that all moral and religious truths are relative. This is a famine of fallacy.

Now, in one sense it is true that all values are relative. When you compare your values to someone else’s, especially in another culture or religion, whether abroad or in the next neighborhood, your values do appear relative *in relation to others*.

But a value has its home in each community or culture. Instead of the confusion of relativism, I entreat you to become conscious of the existence of different ways of living, different cultures and different religions. This diversity does not force us into blurry relativism. Instead, having been given the gift of our particular faith, we should be respectful of the integrity of other faiths, including secularism, and respectful of diverse ways of seeing life that are different, even contradictory, to our own. I do not think I speak anything new here to you.

Yet, relativism is a muddle of modernity. What is basic to human life and to ethics is not some mish-mash of relativism, but forms of life, cultures, ways of living –often ancient

and sometimes new. Each way of life is relative to the others, but within itself it has integrity and conviction. The spaces between our different religions and values should be inhabited first by our silence from awe, humility and mutual respect and then by outstretched hands and hearts.

But the biggest issue this morning is the rejection of any moral truths. The churches have to dance around the swords carefully here because of their history of culturally imposed absolutisms by state sanctioned churches. But the ballet required is still beautiful to behold.

From a naturalistic point of view, even though we are products of our culture, we can be moral persons. What I mean by moral here is not some private purity but how we live in community. Human beings simply have the amazing capacity as part of their evolution to be ethical, to be moral. We probably learn to be moral on our mother's or father's knee. This is not a philosophy, but an appeal to commonsense. Each of us has the capacity to be a moral person. Birds can fly. We can be moral beings. Birds *have* to fly. We *have* to be moral beings.

This amazing capacity to be moral, to live ethically, is reflected in the awe surrounding the story of Moses' receiving the Ten Commandments. The Commandments are just wondrously given and we are just as wondrously expected to grasp them. But the story also captures our downside. For unfortunately, along with our capacity to be moral, we also have the capacity to be greedy, to be faithless, to be violent and to be jealous. For Christians, the Ten Commandments name our sins for us and introduce us to the need for grace and forgiveness to live a moral life. For without this grace we fall into despair --a despair that either crushes us or extrudes us into arrogant self-righteous prigs.

One does not need God to be ethical. But in the midst of the deepest immoralities of human behavior, in the greed, the warring violence and the jealousies, which we institutionalize in darkness, God does appear. God called Samuel to moral greatness.

In the darkness of slavery to the Egyptians, God appeared to Moses and called him to lead Israel into a freedom, a freedom to live ethically as a new people of God, the Jews. For God is always the knot in the last thread of human hope.

We honor on this day, Dr. King, who also learned that God was real. Not from some philosophical abstraction but in the hardscrabble struggle to be ethical, to be a faithful bearer of the word of God and of God's vision, and to bring white America to acknowledge that it has institutionalized racial hate. Dr. King was no muddled relativist. He had clear and sharp Christian beliefs that made a difference to alleviating

human suffering. His beliefs weren't dogmas or absolutisms either. He respected other systems of moral value and belief.

God exists, God appears, not by proofs, but by making her epiphany to anyone who struggles to be a truly moral person and to live ethically towards every human being. For the moral life is not private, but how I greet my neighbor.

It seems that it is from the cries of the oppressed that a word of God is finally heard and a vision of justice is wrought. God exists, God appears, to those who dare to be pure in heart. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

St. Francis Church, as you well know, is a community whom God re-created because of the injustice, the oppression against LGBT people. I honor all the straight and LGBT people of St. Francis for becoming Samuels in this era, for hearing God speaking in the burning bush like Moses, for reforming the church like Luther, and for extending gender rights in the tradition of Martin Luther King.

Remember, it is among the oppressed that God makes her brightest epiphanies. Perhaps God's light appears so strong and bright because of the depths of our darkness. God became real as God always does when human life, institutions and cultures exclude other human beings. Samuels arise. But one thing more.

Yesterday's freedom fighters can become tomorrow's oppressors. Will we one day be on the side of the oppressor? I have no magic recipe here. I can only say that the promise of Jesus is that the pure in heart will always see God. So, if we open our hearts to God, we will see God in the stranger; re-orienting our spirituality so that we do not assume imperiously that we have God to give to them, but the truly opposite, the truly moral, that they bring truths of God to us. But that's a topic for another sermon. We have only just begun. Like Nathaniel, by God's grace, we too will see greater things.

Amen

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