

How To See God—Matthew 25: 31-46
(November 26, 2017-Reign of Christ Sunday)

When I was a kid, a sun burn wasn't a pre-cursor to cancer, it was just a painful annoyance. The pain of a sunburn was made all the worse because I had to spend so much energy pretending I didn't have one. God forbid, if I let on to my brother or my schoolmates that I had a sunburn, There would be no end to the tongue in cheek, sarcastic and painful pats on the back. I didn't appreciate having my sore spot touched.

It's true for a sun burn and it's true in society at large. The late Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero touched many sore spots in his native El Salvador, a country caught in full out civil war between the U.S. backed government and the Soviet backed rebels during the nineteen eighties. Any movement that attempted to empower the peasant classes was viewed by those in power as a communist threat. But Archbishop Romero saw a people struggling under the yoke of political and economic oppression. So, he decided to break with official church policy and publicly support movements that attempted to empower the peasant classes. He also began criticizing the political and economic elites of the nation. For this he was shot and killed while celebrating mass. He said this about touching society's sore spots;

“The church must suffer for speaking the truth, for pointing out sin, for uprooting sin. No one wants to have a sore spot touched, and therefore a society with so many sore spots twitches when someone has the courage to touch it and say: “You have to treat that. You have to get rid of that. Believe in Christ. Be converted.”¹

Matthew's gospel touched many sore spots in his society. He is writing for a community of Jewish Christians who are vying for a place, a voice within the fragments of the Jewish community that survived the Roman defeat of the Jewish uprising in the year 62 in the city of Jerusalem. Matthew argues for a change, for a new definition of religion by criticizing the religious leaders of the day. He argues that righteousness before God is not about status, it's not about intelligence, it's not about having all the answers about God. Righteousness before God is about love and the healing that love brings; “The king will answer the righteous, just as you fed and clothed the least of these so you did it to me.” (vs. 40)

The failure to love creates wounds in our world; sore spots that we would rather not have touched. The failure to look after our brothers and sisters brings us face to face with the pain of our own guilt, our complicity in an economic system that makes obesity an epidemic in some countries and starvation an epidemic in others. I don't know about you but I can no longer look at those commercials on TV that show images of starving children with distended stomachs, with not even enough energy to swat the swarming

¹ As quoted in an article by Rev. John Dear S.J.
www.fatherjohndear.org/pdfs/OscarRomeroNonviolentStruggleforJustice.pdf

flies. I feel judged by those images, it is a sore spot that I admit with some shame that I would rather not touch. We all have those sore spots don't we, often times they are closer to home however; that one person in our lives with which we have never reconciled, the grieving friend we no longer see or call, the elderly relative we no longer visit. What are the sore spots in your life? What are, those places of pain in our world, in our souls that call out for healing and conversion, that call out for love.

Jesus asks us to touch those spots so that we can be healed. He tells us that's where he is—in those sore spots—God is right there. Healing the woundedness in our world is the path to wholeness, it's the path to God:

“Come you that are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you...I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” (vss. 34-36)

Righteousness before God is not about perfection, it's about connection. We will be whole people when we come to know ourselves as complete only in relationship to others and in this unity also a part of something greater than just ourselves. One writer puts it this way:

“In all of our relations we encounter God. Our spouses, our children, our neighbour all count as the least. Every wife who has comforted her husband, every father who gave joy to his child, every friend who has consoled a companion, every mother who has fed her infant or held the dying has encountered the Lord. We suspect our commonplace actions to be insignificant and stale. They are eternal opportunities. As often as we have truly loved, we have loved God.”²

Touching the sore spots of life, being involved in God's work of healing brings us into contact with the presence of God in our midst: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Vs. 40)

But the opposite of this is also true, more interesting and perhaps more of a challenge to many of us. When we allow others to touch our sore spots, when we allow others to enter our vulnerable spaces, when we allow others to love and heal us, our sore spots, our pain becomes a vehicle by which others experience the presence of God. In my own journey I have come to a place where I can say very little about God, so much is mystery, so much is beyond words. But, what I think I can say is that God is connection, God is experienced when we transcend the illusion of our separateness and live in reality as God sees it: “thy kingdom come, on earth, as it is in heaven.” Shared pain, shared

²Rev. John Kavanaugh S.J. http://liturgy.slu.edu/ChristKingA112308/theword_embodied.html

vulnerability, whether we are the healer or the one in need of healing is the vehicle by which Holiness enters our lives.

These are such important messages in Matthew's gospel. I wish he had stopped there. But he doesn't. He takes yet another opportunity to talk about judgement, specifically the final judgement. Matthew is like a dog on a bone, he just can't let go of judgment. He is quite clear, if you didn't love, if you weren't in right relationship with others during your life then you can expect an extended stay in a very warm place upon your demise. He's not talking about Cuba.

For Matthew judgement is a motivator—"If you don't want to go to hell there are certain things you should and shouldn't do." I don't think fear works very well as a motivator in the life of faith, it only leads to acting out of self-interest. In other words we only act in a Christian-like manner out of fear for our own salvation. We miss the whole point, which is love, love of God, love of neighbour, love of self. Notice that scripture says that the righteous did not know they were getting any advantage out of feeding the hungry, or visiting the prisoner; "Lord when was it we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you drink?" (vs. 37)

What can we take from this part of our faith story today? What's the grace, the gift that the Holy One is giving us here? Let me start by saying I don't like to preach on things I know nothing about. Such as the qualifications and logistics for entry into the after-life. But, here is what I think we can take away from this part of the text. I think hell is a good metaphor for self-destructive resistance to God's love, not an arbitrary divine punishment, or retaliation by a vengeful, judgmental God. The Holy One seeks us out in those who need our love and in our own vulnerability, but God will not coerce us. In other words we can exercise our will to reject God. That is hell—where by our own actions and choices love gets rejected and we experience life cut off from each other, from any power beyond self. Heaven, as I said is the opposite—the transcending of the illusion of our separateness.

I invite you in the week to come to keep your eyes open for opportunities to allow a little more holiness, a little more heaven into your life and the lives of others. Ask, "what are the sore spots that I am being invited to touch?" "Where am I being called to be a little more vulnerable?" It is in the sore spots of life that God reaches out to us. May God grant to us the faith and the courage to see in our neediest brothers and sisters and in our own neediness an invitation to healing and wholeness and a foretaste of life eternal. Amen.