

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

LIVING IN THE LIGHT

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

I have to laugh when my granddaughters play any game that involves hiding. Alley, who is 4, does a pretty good job of finding a place where she cannot be seen. But Kendall, who will be 2 later this month, is still at that stage where “if I cannot see you then you cannot see me.” So, when she hides her head goes behind a piece of furniture or a curtain while the rest of her is completely and obviously exposed to the world – but as far as she is concerned, she is hiding. I guess we all go through that ostrich stage of life. However, she does have one thing correct. When you cannot see something it is hidden from you.

Take, for instance, when Kendall cries out in bed at night. All the lights are off, so she is hidden from sight right there in the open. As I walk into her dark bedroom from a lighted hallway, I cannot even tell if she is in her bed, let alone to what end of it she has traveled. All I can do is reach out until my fingers “find” her. More often than not, I have to discern my way through a roll of blankets and the ubiquitous stuffed bunny before I can find Kendall.

This points out the simple truth that when we are in the dark, real objects are hidden from us and any object we encounter is likely to be mistaken for something else. But with light, whether it is from a flashlight or the sun, comes the full revelation of the objects as they really are.

In the season of Epiphany we remember how the light of Christ revealed to the world the reality and nature of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. From the Gentile Wise men following the star to Bethlehem, the Words of the Father at Jesus' baptism, the opening of the eyes of Nathanael and ultimately the revelation of the resurrected Christ to the Disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, the light of Truth illuminates our understanding of God in Christ. Yet as a light shown in a dark room illumines not only the objects in the room but also the observer standing in the room, the light of Truth exposes us as well as Jesus. It is the presence of Christ that reveals who we are and who we are meant to be. In terms of today's New Testament lesson, the light makes manifest how we are acting and how we are supposed to act.

First St. Paul addresses the matter of our freedom. The one who is free is not mastered by anything – not even the need to be free. Once again we come upon the fact that to predicate our freedom on the possession of certain rights makes us a slave to those rights for they determine who we believe ourselves to be and how we evaluate or identify ourselves. True freedom is expressed in the personal choice not to exercise the rights we have because then those rights do not define who we are, determine our state of mind or dictate our actions. We are created as dependent beings. That is our essence, therefore we will always be dependent upon something or someone. Absolute freedom is impossible in the presence of inherent dependency. For example, physiologically we are dependent upon water. We will die if we do not have water, so we are not free to refuse to drink water and live. Given the way we are created we can strive for true freedom but not absolute freedom. The secret of the Christian life is that our true freedom is

found in freely submitting to Christ because that is the fulfillment of who we were designed to be.

So when we come to the question of how we are to live, the second matter addressed by the Apostle is the matter of our design and purpose. God has created us for his purpose and to use our bodies for any other purpose is to deny the sovereignty of God and be enslaved to our rebellious nature. We were created in the image of God, male and female (Genesis 1:27). To be the image of something or someone is to be the representation of that object or person in the setting in which we are placed. God is sovereign so we must not be enslaved to anything other than God if we are to be his image in the world. As his image we must also represent his will, which we do by living in obedience to his commandments. God is loving and self-giving, therefore, if we are to accurately be a symbol of him in the world we must serve others and not seek their service for ourselves. In addition, God is holy, so we must live holy lives, that is, lives that are set apart by God and for God as distinct from the natural immorality of this fallen world. Since God is almighty and victorious over sin, death and the devil, we must live lives that are characterized by confidence in who he is and what he does. To be ourselves is to present our own image to the world and not God's image. Unfortunately the world knows all too well who we are. What the world needs to be shown is who God is.

Finally, St. Paul tells us how we can live in true freedom and fulfill God's will for our lives. God knows that we alone cannot fulfill our call to be his image in this world. As an answer to our "mission-impossible," God gives us his Spirit to live in us and guide us according to the ways of God. And if the Spirit of God resides in us then we are his temple – a sacred place that we must not allow to be defiled. The first commandment is that "You shall have no other gods before me" (Deuteronomy 5:8). As custodians of the Temple of the Holy Spirit that is our body, then we are breaking the first commandment, and probably the second if we use our bodies in an unholy manner. But even beyond the role of custodian, we are stewards over our bodies since God has given them to us for our obedient use. He created them, caused us to be born with them and will raise them from the grave after we die. Therefore, our physical bodies have eternal significance. British theologian, N. T. Wright puts it this way:

The point of the resurrection...is that *the present bodily life is not valueless just because it will die*. God will raise it to new life. What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it. And if this applies to ethics...it certainly applies to the various vocations to which God's people are called. What you *do* in the present – by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself – *will last into God's future*. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it all behind altogether...They are part of what we may call *building for God's kingdom*. (*Surprised by Hope*, p. 193)

That statement reveals the truth not only about the human body but about the mission of the Church – the Body of Christ. What we do in this life and how we do it have eternal significance – a significance that we can only find through the light of Christ.

In the darkness of unknowing, the darkness that is the result of the absence of the light of Truth, we mistake one thing for another. We are mistaken about God, the world and ourselves. We are mistaken about the present and the future. We are mistaken about the kingdom of God. It is the light of Christ that reveals that the resurrection life begins on this side of the grave when we seriously take hold of our baptism. It is then that we become new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). The resurrection life is a life guided by the Holy Spirit and one that provides us with the freedom, not to glorify ourselves, but to fulfill our true selves. It is the new life infused into our beings that enables us to make God known in our bodies and that marks us as Christ's own forever.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshiped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. Amen. (BCP, p. 215)

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Mathew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on January 15, 2012, the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B.