

Sermon: Year C, Proper 19  
Texts: Exodus 32:1, 7-14  
I Timothy 1:12-17  
Luke 15:1-10

In one of his more famous set of verses, the poet e.e. cummings tried to put words to the experience of intimacy and love, describing it in a manner more revelatory than the usual huffing and puffing found in Hallmark cards. These are the lines that he set down. He wrote:

your slightest look will easily unclose me  
though i have closed myself as fingers,  
you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens  
(touching skillfully, mysteriously) her first rose

(i do not know what it is about you that closes  
and opens; only something in me understands  
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)  
nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands.

Part of the marvel of being human is our ability to render our very selves in words, discovering, then, in highly crafted expressions a fuller measure of who we are and what time and life and, in this case, companionship can mean. Poets make the common holy, by hallowing language and, by means of it, paying acute attention to what presents itself before us.

Not much poetry is read anymore, or sold, or, consequently, published. There is a delicacy to it that has been overwhelmed by the push and noise of our culture. It's a patient and stringent discipline that seems outmoded in comparison to the speed and the sheer volume of response obtained by Googling anything. Language now races by in a flurry, a ready blur of imagery. Plug in any word and, within a fraction of a second, you can get back several million links. Google dazzles us with its immediacy and the ease with which it delivers the world. We used to mine a word or a phrase in order to grasp its full meaning. The metaphor is telling. Understanding something took digging, concentration, applying ourselves to hard and careful work. Now, instead, we surf, riding excitedly on the tops of rolling waves of information as vast as the sea. Exhilaration comes more from breadth than depth – but there has been a cost to this transition.

Information is general and objective, a great wash of data. But revelation remains highly specific and subjective, and stubbornly so. It depends on the absolute uniqueness of the moment, of the person, of the looks exchanged or the words shared. "The voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses," cummings wrote. This wasn't his contribution of a broad principle of love, that applies in general, that can be mass produced in ten million cards, which, in turn, can be stocked in franchised pharmacies behind the placard "Anniversary." What it is, is an expression of love that pulls us in precisely because it is so stupendously singular. Even though we do not know who, it addresses someone, and this makes all the difference.

In a similar way, in the Gospel reading we have heard this morning, Jesus told two parables that were meant to be, not generally informative, but revelatory. He was being criticized by the Pharisees, whose self-assigned role was to subsume all of life under the vast structure of their highly developed system of religious rules. And Jesus was violating the principles of their faith by eating with persons of questionable standing.

In return, then, he answered by speaking of the shepherd who leaves his flock in order to search out the single lamb that has wandered off. And if this story were not enough, he

added a second parable, telling of the woman who, having lost only one coin of ten, still overturned everything in the house until the missing coin was found. These stories, said Jesus, do not confront us with a general command that hovers over our lives, a rule that orders our world; rather, it reveals the very specific disposition and commitment of God, which he was disclosing. Thus, he said, with God, the herd does not take precedence over even one lost creature. God is no utilitarian. Keeping track of the many does not excuse or allow forgetting a single other. There is no room in God's love for collateral damage, accepting the loss of a few for the good of the rest. Nor is God willing to be resigned to having enough rather than all. Nine silver coins would cover the bills of the household, but this is completely beside the point. Ten was the complete number. Ten will be recounted. God's greatest energies are directed toward those who, by any other measure, could or should be abandoned. God's love, personal and singular, said Jesus, outweighs all other judgment – judgments which, conveniently, or by the standard of fairness, we would be inclined to apply in general, as satisfactory and justifiable.

These very parables were confirmed, then, by Paul's own testimony in his letter to Timothy. Paul declared that they applied specifically to him. By all rights, he said, he himself deserved no favor. According to the rules, he was the best of the Pharisees, and thus by law the worst of sinners, the most aggressive persecutor and enemy of God, He was the very one who was most removed, most resistant to grace, most adamant in the violence he gladly provoked. Yet God did not abandon him. God sought him out as the very sheep that was most lost, and God carried him back to the fold, rejoicing, and appointed him an apostle, so that Paul, by the eloquence of his own life and the power of his own words could be himself the confirmation of the revelation begun in Jesus Christ. Paul minced no words in drawing this picture. The true nature and disposition of God is shown in this redeeming, even of the one who was most boldly and proudly the least.

Taken as a rule, this would be deeply disquieting. It seems radically unjust to us, in general, that someone should be offered love in spite of all offense and evil and be extended such determined forgiveness. It seems to be inherently wrong to us that reconciliation should be afforded every single human being. But this very judgment by us highlights one of our most persistent problems. We tend to think of God in general terms first, precisely as the rule of all rules. God, said Paul Tillich, is "the ground of all being," the Ur-principle of the universe. God is defined by the most flattering and impressive constructs we can think of – all powerful, all knowing, all present, everything and everywhere, and ultimately, because we so demand it, the stern and absolute decider, determining our fate by holding us up, finally, against his own infinite and imperial standard. God is the foundation of all our judgment, who guarantees that our actions will be met with proper consequences. And it is the threat of condemnation and the possibility of reward that drives our faith.

Under the sway of this conviction the church has wielded great power, and, thereby, it has also done equal damage. It has repeatedly named this group or that to be outcasts, non-conforming to doctrine or teachings or cultural acceptance, and ministers have thundered from pulpits. Each age has its own enemies against whom, in God's name, the church has turned. Each age has its own issues, its own debates, its own subsequent abuse of some, who are given a general name – because they seem not to fit within the principled life demanded by God himself, which we have been charged to enforce, under penalty of condemnation.

But is this what Jesus said of God? Is this what he revealed? Is God this severe judge? Is this God's prime function? Or would it be more in line with Jesus' own testimony, when thinking of the nature and disposition of God, to have these very different, revelatory lines come to mind as defining and absolute:

your slightest look will easily unclothe me  
though i have closed myself as fingers,

you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens  
(touching skillfully, mysteriously) her first rose

(i do not know what it is about you that closes  
and opens; only something in me understands  
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)

nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands.

These verses describe the shepherd of whom Jesus spoke. They describe the shepherd who Jesus is. He is the very word of God, God's own acute word made incarnate, who alone reveals God's self to us, in precisely this form: "nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands."

This is what all of Scripture attests, if we read with patience, digging carefully, looking not for general ideas about big things, but for the word that singularly seeks us out and personally addresses each of us. What would Christianity look like if what we could say first and always about God was that the voice of her eyes is deeper than all roses and we ourselves have been unclosed? This is what Paul heard, profoundly. This is what we can hear with equal grace. And if the church has any primary charge of witness to the world, it is to mirror God's chosen smallness on behalf of each soul ever called to life, skillfully, mysteriously, opening what others have closed and closed off.

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