



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Next of Kin

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 30, 2012
The First Sunday after Christmas Day
Based on John 1:1-18*

As I was preparing the talk for the Forum I gave three weeks ago, I remembered a quote attributed to Sister Elaine Roulette, the founder of My Mother's House here in New York. When she was asked, "How do you work with the poor?" Sr. Elaine answered, "You don't. You share life with the poor."

The season of Christmas is about God entering into the world to share life with humanity. This morning's reading from the Gospel of John relates the incarnation without all of the traditional stories. No angels, no stable, no shepherds, no wise men, and not even a drummer boy.

And yet toward the end of the reading there is a very powerful image that John uses to express the incarnation: "The Word became flesh and lived among us." I have been told that the verb "lived" as in "lived among us" loses the potency of the Greek. My college Greek professor told us that the verb, which is translated "lived," really means to set up one's tent. And so you could say, "The Word became human and set up its tent among us." The scholars of the Jesus Seminar translate it this way: "The divine word and wisdom made itself at home among us."

This image of God making himself at home among us is what the Incarnation is all about. Not a temporary arrangement like relatives who come for the holidays . . . Christmas is about God moving in with us. Christmas is about God moving in and adopting us. Christmas is about God making us God's kin. The Apostle Paul wrote, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman . . . so that we might receive adoption as children."

God erased the boundary between the divine and the human, between heaven and earth and became one of us so that we might know and believe that we are one with God. We are God's kin. Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest in Los Angeles, writes that "Kinship is not about serving the other but being one with the other." And if we are one with God who is one with humanity, then we are also one with everyone else. We forget that from time to time. Mother Teresa diagnosed the world's ills in this way: "We've just forgotten that we belong to each other." This idea of kinship, of belonging to each other, is what informs the ways in which we share life with each other.

This idea of kinship, the idea of being one with another, challenges the modern romantic notion of kinship based on affiliation, similar characteristics, personality types, or other data.

There was an interesting article in the *New York Times* this week about a flight attendant and a businessman on a first date. The date was going well, so well in fact that as dessert was served the flight attendant "tried not to get ahead of herself and imagine this first date turning into another and another, and maybe at some point, a glimmering ring and happily ever after. She simply couldn't help it, though. After all, he was tall, from a religious family, raised by his grandparents just as she was, worked in finance and even had great teeth."

We have all been there. It is easy and perhaps essential to our ability to love that we are able to imagine a hopeful future based on very limited data points and yet this can be a trap. It is so easy to fall in love with our imagined partner that we overlook the person who is right in front of us. This is a trap because when the person in front of us does not live up to our imagined partner we feel cheated, hurt and even angry.

Evidently the flight attendant was not the only one whose thoughts were leaping ahead. She reports that her musings were suddenly interrupted when her date asked a decidedly unromantic question: “What’s your credit score?” “It was as if the music stopped,” the flight attendant reported, recalling how the date went so wrong so quickly after she tried to answer his question honestly. “It was really awkward because he kept telling me that I was the perfect girl for him, but that my low credit score was a deal-breaker for him.”

The interesting thing is that both parties miss the point. They are interested in making decisions—kinship decisions—based on data points, similarities and compatibility rather than entering into the life of another and making oneself at home. Making oneself at home takes time, for it is only over time that we really come to feel kinship. Sharing too much too soon is the one sure way to kill a relationship.

But it is not just the flight attendant and the businessman who miss the point. The idea of taking time to make oneself at home and discover one’s kinship with others challenges the modern notion of affiliation based on sharing emotions or similar experiences such as disease or disaster. David Brooks, in a *New York Times* editorial wrote this week of the evidence that modern ways of sharing emotions and affiliation are not working. To exemplify his point he talks about exclamation points and the public displays of emotion that have recently become hallmarks of our public life. He writes, “The exclamation point was not a standard feature on typewriters until the 1970s. Nobody wore blue or pink or yellow ribbons to show their emotional attachments to various causes until 1979. But all that has changed. Today we are awash in exclamation points and affiliation symbols and sentiment more generally.” And yet, Brooks concludes, “The interesting thing is that all this sentiment is not actually bringing people closer together.”

What will bring us closer together?

The Christmas message is that sharing life and kinship is what brings us closer together. In the Christmas Carol “O Holy Night,” the third line has always been a favorite: “Long lay the world in sin and error pining—‘til he appeared and the soul felt its worth.” Kinship is about appearing or being present, remembering that we belong to one another, and letting souls feel their worth. Kinship is about showing up and letting souls feel their worth.

This idea of kinship is informed by our understanding of compassion and mercy. Boyle writes, “Compassion isn’t just about feeling the pain of others”; is that ever really possible? No, compassion isn’t about feeling the pain of others; compassion is “about bringing them in toward yourself.” That is what God does at Christmas. God enters into the world and brings us close. God makes himself at home with us.

Another Jesuit, James Keenan, defines mercy as “the willingness to enter into the chaos of others.” At Christmas God enters into the human chaos. In spite of all the data points trending in the other direction, God enters human chaos and brings us closer. Bringing us closer does not make us better, or right, or even happy all the time, but it does let our souls know their worth. We are kin, children of the same God.

Merry Christmas!

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