Sunday, June 26, 1988
FINDING GOD THROUGH OTHERS (No. 3 in a Series: Finding God in Everyday Life)
Hebrews 13:1-3; Matthew 25:31-40

It is the testimony of the Christian faith that God is to be found and experienced in everyday life. Too often, we make the mistake of thinking that God is in a separate compartment in the world and so we speak of things being either sacred or secular. But such is not the case. God made everything in the world and saw that it was good. Thus, God is to be found in everyday life.

Two weeks ago, in the first sermon in this series — entitled “Finding God Within Yourself"—we were reminded that God is present within each human being, and the more you come to know yourself, the more you come to know God. However, coming to truly know yourself is not always as easy as it sounds. Our true self is frequently covered up or hidden, and a peeling process is sometimes necessary.

Last week, in the second sermon in this series — entitled “Finding God Through Things"—we were reminded that the things of this world can minister to us, especially since God made them all. Unfortunately, many of us have been taught that there is something tainted about the material world, as if God had not made what we call material. Of course, we can misuse things. We can make the mistake of worshipping the things of this world. However, if we see things as gifts from God, God can be revealed through them.

Today, in the third sermon of the series, the subject is—"Finding God Through Others.”

Here’s a poem that expresses this theme:

The parish priest of austerity
Climbed up in a high church steeple to be nearer God
So that he might hand God’s word to the people.

When the sun was high, when the sun was low,
The good man sat unheeding sublunary things,
From transcendency was he forever reading.

And now and again when he heard the creak
Of the weather vane a-turning, he closed his eyes
And said, “Of a truth from God I now am learning.”

And in sermon script he daily wrote
What he thought was sent from heaven
And he dropped this down on his people’s heads
Two times one day in seven.

In his age, God said, “Come down and die!”
And he cried out from the steeple, “Where Art Thou God?”
And God replied, “Down here among my people.”

There is more in the Bible on the subject of finding God through others than in any other way. In a sense, there is no road to God that does not pass through our neighbor, and according to

Christ, our neighbor is everyone. We are even told to love our enemies, for we may very well find God in and through them.

You never know when you might find God in and through someone else. That's why, in the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament, as read earlier, we are reminded, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

In the Bible, angels are seen as both the messengers and the message of God, but that makes them no easier to receive. For one thing, we almost never recognize them, even when they knock at our door. Someone said that if angels came wrapped in packages, we would almost always pick the wrong one. We would pick the big one or the one wrapped in silver foil with a fancy blue bow, certainly not the one in brown paper fastened with a string.

There's a story in the Old Testament, in the Book of Genesis, about three strangers who came to the door of the tent of Abraham when he was camped by the oaks of Mamre. He invited them in, had water brought to wash their feet, and suggested they rest under a shade tree before they moved on. Sarah fixed them a fine meal of fresh bread and butter, milk, and veal. Before they left, they announced that Sarah, already an old woman, would give birth to a son. Abraham and Sarah had been entertaining angels all along but did not recognize it until the strangers were gone.

If angels are frequently strangers, how can we recognize them? Often, we can't, which is why it is wise to do as Abraham and Sarah did and offer hospitality to strangers who pass our way. That's what the book of Hebrews was talking about when it says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

Finding God through others can happen in so many ways, some of them quite surprising.

Jesus told a parable that illustrates this point. It was read earlier from the Gospel of Matthew and is often called the parable of the sheep and the goats.

In the story, Jesus said that one day God will separate us as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. God will say to some of us, "Come, blessed people, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you welcomed me; I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me." Then the righteous will ask in surprise, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" And God will answer, said Jesus, "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me."

Do you truly want to find God? According to Jesus, the way to find God is through loving and serving others, especially the poor, the sick, the prisoner, the helpless. You will find God as you minister to them.

Bob Greene, the newspaper columnist, discovered a modern version of this parable and wrote about it.

"A bum died. That's what it seemed like. They found his body in a flophouse on West Madison Street, Chicago's Skid Row. White male, about 55 years old. A bum died. They didn't know."

His name was Arthur Joseph Kelly. Growing up, he wanted to be a fireman. When he was a child, he would go to the firehouse at Aberdeen and Washington, the home of Engine 34. His two sisters would go with him sometimes. The firemen were nice to the kids.

Arthur Joseph Kelly became a teenager and then a man, and he never quite had what it takes to be a fireman. He didn't make it. He did make it into the Army. He was a Private in World War II, serving in the European Theater of Operations. He didn't make out too well. He suffered from shell shock. It messed him up pretty badly.

He was placed in a series of military hospitals, and then, when the war was over, in Veteran's Hospitals. Whatever happened to him in the service wasn't getting any better. He would be released from a hospital, and he would go back to the old neighborhood in Chicago, and suddenly the "L train would come rumbling overhead, and Arthur Joseph Kelly would dive to the ground. Some people laughed at him. He didn't want to do it. A loud noise, and he would drop.

He walked away from a Veteran's Hospital in 1954. He decided that he had to live in the real world. But he was in no condition to do that. He tried for a while, and then he went back to the only place that he remembered as being a place of happiness.

He went back to the Fire Station at Aberdeen and Washington. Some of the men of Engine 34 remembered Arthur Joseph Kelly from when he was a boy. They remembered him as a bright-eyed child wanting to be a fireman. And now they saw him as a shell-shocked veteran.

They took him in. They fed and clothed him, and gave him a place to sleep and let him be one of them. He wasn't a fireman, of course, but he lived in the firehouse, and he had the firemen as his friends. The military people didn't know what to do with his Veteran's benefits, so some of the firemen went to the Exchange National Bank and arranged for the benefit money to be paid to a special account. The firemen of Engine 34 took it upon themselves to become Arthur Joseph Kelly's conservator and guardian.

The years went by. Some of the firemen were transferred, some retired, and some died. But there was always at least one fireman at the station who would take responsibility for Arthur Joseph Kelly.

His mind and his nerves were not good. The firemen had to remind him to bathe, to change clothes, and to eat properly. They did it for twenty years and more, without anyone asking. "He's an easy-going fellow," one of them said. "He doesn't harm anybody. It's not hard for us to take care of him."

Then the firehouse closed down. The firemen were transferred to another station house at Laflin and Madison. Arthur Joseph Kelly went with them, but it wasn't the same. It wasn't the firehouse he had loved as a child. He didn't want to live there.

So the last fireman to take care of him, George Grant, a fifty-one-year-old father of eight, found Arthur Joseph Kelly a place to live. It wasn't much — it was a room on Madison Street — but every month, Grant would take care of the financial arrangements with the bank and would go to Madison Street to give money to a lady who ran a tavern near Kelly's room. The understanding was that she would give Kelly his meals at the tavern. No liquor. The firemen didn't want Kelly to end up as a Madison Street wino.

When Arthur Joseph Kelly was found dead in his room, they thought he was a bum. But they should have been at the funeral. Arthur Joseph Kelly was buried with dignity. He was carried to his grave by uniformed firemen. They were his pallbearers. Most of them were not even born when, as a boy, Kelly had started hanging around the firehouse. But they were there at the end.

Jesus said, “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me.” According to Jesus, these firemen found God in Arthur Joseph Kelly. And Arthur Joseph Kelly experienced God through these firemen.

We can find and experience God in many different kinds of human relationships. Husbands and wives can reveal God to each other.

Parents can reveal God to their children. My own mother taught me more about God than any book, theology class, or theologian, and she did this without ever talking about God directly. She did this by the interest, trust, affection, freedom, and forgiveness she gave to me and to my sisters and brothers and to others outside the family as well.

And children can reveal God to their parents. Walter Wangerin tells a story of how his young son revealed God to him.

His son Matthew had always been borderline hyperactive. The child leaped before he crawled. Wangerin is a pastor and believes himself to be a patient man. He is paid to be patient. But his over-active son continually tested his patience.

At the age of eight, the young son ran away from home. The night before, they had had an argument during bedtime prayers. The next morning, there was an argument at the breakfast table. Dad lost his temper. Here’s how he described it: “All my rhetorical skills, honed these ten years in the pulpit, flashed in the living room, slammed the walls, damned a child for a no-account, and withered his soul to nothing. In round and echoing terms, I did condemn the boy. In the language of Moses and the prophets, I sinned against my son.”

That afternoon he ran away. Clarence Fields, Cub Scout leader, called from the Church. “Isn’t Matthew coming today?” “He should’ve come straight from school,” said his father. “That’s an hour ago, and he isn’t here yet,” said Clarence.

Then Matthew’s brother said that Matthew had run away. But he didn’t know where he went. Matthew had said that he wasn’t worth nothing and wasn’t coming back.

A search was organized. Several hours later, as Matthew’s Dad was crossing through a park, he saw his son, dragging his little self toward home. His Dad fell in step alongside him and said, “You ran away.” “Yes,” said Matthew. “But you came home,” said his Dad. “I saw a man. I thought he was going to kidnap me. I was afraid. So I came home.”

Father and son went the rest of the way home in silence. Later, Dad was in his study alone, with the door open, and Matthew, walking by, looked in and saw him. “You okay?” Matthew asked his Dad. “No,” said his Dad. “Are you sick?” “Yes,” said Dad, and then Dad began to cry. “Oh-h-h-h-h,” said Matthew softly, “Don’t worry,” and he came into the study and put his hand on his Dad’s knee. “I love you,” he said. He smiled briefly, and he left.

“That child,” thought his Dad, “that child had no right to forgive me so. Where did he get the knowledge? Where did he get the maturity, except God be in him.” A door had opened in the universe, and the glory of God had burst from a little child.

And so it happens to many of us, day after day. The grace and love of God are revealed to us through others — sometimes in our serving others and sometimes in their serving us. It can and does happen to each one of us. Amen.