Sunday, January 9, 2005
BLESSED ASSURANCE
Matthew 3:13-17

Groucho Marx, the comedian, was famous for his “one-liners.” He said, “Age is not a particularly interesting subject. Anyone can get old. All you have to do is live long enough.” He also said, “I find television very educating. Every time somebody turns on the set, I go into the other room and read a book.” Here’s another of his one-liners: “I never forget a face, but in your case, I’ll be glad to make an exception.” He also said, “I had a perfectly wonderful evening. But this wasn’t it.” My favorite one-liner is, “I sent the club a wire stating, ‘Please accept my resignation. I don’t want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member.'”

There is a tension that is present in human beings. You want to be accepted and loved. You also have trouble believing that you are accepted and loved, or sometimes even worthy of being loved and accepted. You want to know you are connected in meaningful ways to other human beings and to God, and at the same time, you feel separated and lonely. There are also times when you want to be alone, to be separated from others. You value your individuality.

Human beings experience separation in at least three ways. You can feel separated from yourself. You can feel separated from God. You can feel separated from others. Human beings can also be at one with yourself. You can experience oneness with others, and you can know you are at one with God. The word “atonement” literally means at-one-ment, that is, to be connected, to be in harmony with God, with others, and with yourself. The highest desire of every human being is to be at one with God, with yourself, and with others. All three of these connections go together. You want that blessed assurance of acceptance and connection. That’s why Jesus said the most important commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

When you are at one with God, you are happier and healthier. For example, an expanding business in today’s world, especially in the United States, is “assisted living” for older people who no longer can live alone or want to live alone. Because of living in relationships with other people, their lives are being extended. The actuarial tables have had to be revised. It’s also been discovered that bringing pets into nursing homes and other kinds of extended care facilities can have a positive effect on those who are being cared for.

There are people who search all over the world in exotic places and strange religious movements in an attempt to gain this blessed assurance that they are connected to the Spirit of God where they live, in everyday ordinary commonplace events. Jesus said, “The Spirit of God is in the midst of you, within you and among you.” He also said, “Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I also.” The Apostle Paul wrote, “God is not far from any one of us, for in God we live and move and have our being.”

Yet, being at one with yourself, with others, and with God does not always come easily. I remember a phone call I had from a young woman years ago. She called me at home in the evening and said she was having a difficult time with her faith in God, especially believing in God’s goodness because of the suffering in the world. She wanted very much to believe and experience a connection to the sacred, and some of the time, she did. Then, at other times, when she thought of all the pain and suffering in the world and in her life, she concluded that faith in God and God’s grace didn’t make much sense.

I told her I was familiar with her experience. I also wonder at times why there is so much evil and suffering in the world. I also wonder why there is so much good in the world.

What people want to discover and experience, like this young woman who telephoned me, is the blessed assurance that they are good, that God is good, that life is good, and that they are accepted by God.

The young woman who called me said that in different words. I asked her to give some examples of the kind of relationship with God and others that she desired. She said something like this: “When I can feel and know that I am loved even though everything around me seems to say that I am unlovable, then I know I am connected with God and others. When I experience gratitude enough to make me glad, then I know that God’s Spirit is alive in me.”

She went on to say, “I know it is the testimony of the Christian faith that God’s Spirit is present within us in bad times and in good, in sorrow and in joy, but why does this experience of being accepted seem to come and go?”

I told her she was asking the right questions. She had used the words “discover” and “experience” God’s Spirit. She was not talking about achievement. She knew that one’s relationship with God is not experienced more powerfully by trying harder. Rather, it’s a matter of being open to the Sacred and allowing that power to work in our lives. You do not have to go to a far country or some special place to experience this.

A story I remember has been helpful to me. Many years ago, there lived in Cracow, Poland, a Rabbi named Eisik who dreamed three times that there was a treasure buried beneath a particular bridge in the City of Prague. After the third dream, Eisik finally walked the long distance to Prague. When he found the bridge, the captain of the soldiers who were guarding the bridge asked him why he had come. Eisik told him about his three dreams. The captain said that if he had faith in dreams, he would have gone to Cracow a long time ago when he dreamed that there was a treasure buried in the ground under the stove of a Jew named Eisik. When Rabbi Eisik heard this, he left immediately and walked the long journey home and dug up the treasure under his kitchen stove. This story, which dates back to the 8th century, is about you and me. You tend to think the treasure you’ve been looking for is somewhere else when all the time it is under the kitchen stove at home. Or you could think the treasure is something to be achieved by your own effort.

It is precisely here that the life and teachings of Jesus are an immense help. He was first and foremost a “spirit person,” a “mediator of the sacred,” one of those persons in human history who was powerfully aware of God’s Spirit everywhere. Spirit persons are those who experience the sacred frequently and vividly.

The story read earlier from the gospel of Matthew is a good illustration. When Jesus was baptized by John, he later described the event to his followers as the “Spirit of God descending on him like a dove.” It was God’s blessed assurance. He knew in that moment that it was as if God was reassuring him, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

That’s the blessed assurance everyone desires. Nothing earth-shaking, yet powerful — the experience of being accepted. The persons who were there and witnessed the baptism saw nothing out of the ordinary. It was later that Jesus described the experience to some of his followers.

How do you experience God's Spirit in your life? First, remember that you are a spirit person because you are created in God's image, and God has breathed into you the breath of life. The Hebrew word for breath means spirit. I believe there are special spirit persons, and Jesus was the supreme one. He can help you discover the spirit that is in you. He was the "light of the world." In addition, he came to remind you that you are the light of the world. Someone described it this way: "God's Spirit, God's loving energy is everywhere — inside rocks and trees, animals, and in you. Sometimes it seems to get concentrated in certain places and beams out at you in a special way."

Not only are you also a spirit person, you experience God's blessed assurance in different ways and places. It is the blessed assurance that life can be all right even when everything seems all wrong. In my own experience, God's blessed assurance frequently comes through the activity of another person affirming and accepting me, especially when I feel unacceptable.

I am not talking here about some kind of magic that automatically makes everything all right in an instant. Many times, it is a series of small steps as you journey through life. You would be making a mistake if you always expected everything to happen at once, instantly, fully formed. Your deepening relationship with God and others frequently comes in fragments, a nudge of power here, and a ray of hope there. It sometimes takes place in one segment of your life and then another. Do not look for the whole story to be told in one chapter.

This is true in all areas of your life. Here's an example from athletics. In a study done by sociologist Daniel F. Chambliss, entitled The Mundanity of Excellence, Dr. Chambliss reports on a three-year study of excellent swimmers. He discovered that the major difference between swimmers who win Olympic medals and those who don't is not talent but the care and consistency with which Olympic swimmers engage in practice.

To be sure, there are natural differences in ability that you typically identify as talent. But his research demonstrates that when you see the full flowering of someone's careful practices, you mistakenly attribute that to "talent" because you are not remembering the years of practice and the cultivation of habits and techniques that come together to constitute excellence.

He writes: "Of course, there is no secret; there is only the doing of those little things, each one done correctly, time and time again, until excellence becomes an ordinary part of one's everyday life."

You can learn from other excellent athletes, performers, and artists about the centrality of this attention to detail, habit, and the doing of ordinary things day by day. Whether it is shooting endless free throws, hitting thousands of golf balls, or practicing scales on the piano, excellence is shaped by disciplined attention to the little things.

Commitment to the little things is crucial in the spiritual realm as well. Too often, people focus primarily on dramatic conversions, overwhelming encounters with God, and powerful moments of prayer. If you are only searching for peak experiences, you can miss God's Spirit in everyday common events. It's easy to forget, as someone said, that life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.

Kathleen Norris writes in one of her books, "In the life of faith, as well as in our most intimate relationships with other people, our task is to transform the high romance of conversion, the fervor of a religious call, into daily commitment; into the sort of friendship that transcends

infatuation and can endure all things. Our desire is to love God and each other in stable relationships that, like any good marriage, remain open to surprises and receptive to grace."

In his baptism, Jesus heard once again God saying to him and through Jesus to you, "You are accepted. You are accepted; accepted by that which is greater than you. Accept the fact that you are accepted." When that happens to you, you experience grace. This grace is what then gives you the power to accept the life of another, maybe even someone you have always thought of as your enemy. I am convinced that this grace of God is always at work in the world, even when it is not given that name. I see it at work in the amazing response to the devastation caused by the recent earthquake in the Indian Ocean. People from all over the world are seeing those who are suffering as their sisters and brothers, and are doing what they can do.

Remember above all God's blessed assurance: you are accepted. To fully experience this affirmation, begin by accepting and affirming others whom you have heretofore seen as being unacceptable. Amen.