Sunday, August 21, 2005
TRYING TO KNOW GOD
Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 16:13-20

The news every day is filled with stories of people who are searching for something more in their lives. They want to find something that assures them that there is more to life than what the eye can see, the ear can hear, the mouth can taste, the hand can touch, or the nose can smell. They want the assurance that there is something more to life than what money can buy.

This search for something more, more meaning in life, is carried out in many ways. At its deepest level, it is a search for knowing God. Every year, thousands of people go to Memphis, Tennessee, to pay homage to their dead hero, Elvis Presley. The image of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is claimed to be seen on a piece of toast, a cookie, or some other object, and it sells for a good price on eBay. This is in spite of the fact that no one knows what Mary looked like. No pictures were taken of her or portraits painted while she was on earth. How would you know it was an image of Mary?

There was a story in the newspapers about thousands of people who traveled to a house in a California town to see what they claimed was an image of an angel appearing on a woman's TV set. Would you recognize an image of an angel if you saw one? The police chief and a TV repairman said the image was caused by the TV set's failed capacitor and a low voltage power supply.

Connected to this desire for something more is the fact that human beings, at the same time, want order and security in their lives. Many people want certainty about why things happen. They want answers to unexplainable events. When hurricanes or other natural disasters strike, or unexpected illness occurs, human beings ask, "What caused this? Why did this happen to me? What did I do wrong?"

Because of this desire for answers, human beings are tempted to explain natural disasters like tsunami waves, droughts, hurricanes, the bubonic plague, and earthquakes as caused by God as punishment. And when events take place that are seen as positive, human beings are tempted to see them as God's favor for them. General George Patton, in his diary, attributed the fair weather that accompanied his military successes in France in 1944 and 1945 as a sign from God, who he believed favored the Allies and hated the Germans. Since God was assumed to live just above the sky, divine direction of the weather was easy to imagine.

Some modern athletes seem to believe that the God above the sky directs their fortunes. You can see an athlete making the sign of the cross before stepping into the batter's box or walking to the free throw line. Others point to the sky in gratitude to the God who helped them strike out an opponent, hit a home run, or kick a winning field goal.

This theology also penetrates the way tragedies are interpreted by some people. Survivors who climb out of an airliner crash or escape a subway bombing seem to assume that God has spared their lives. The unspoken implication is that those who died deserved it or that God had no special plan for them beyond premature death.

What is behind this kind of thinking? It is part of what it means to be human to yearn for some assurance that you are not alone in this vast and empty-feeling world. It's a desire to know God, to be connected to the Sacred. Humans are the only creatures whose minds are

sufficiently developed to embrace the vastness of the universe, and even then, you have trouble doing that.

Here's an example. Astronomers tell you that the sun around which earth orbits is one of perhaps 400 billion stars in the Milky Way, which is a piddling galaxy next door to nothing much. There are perhaps 140 billion galaxies in the still-unfolding universe. If all the stars in the universe were only the size of the head of a pin, they would fill Nebraska's Memorial Stadium to overflowing more than 3 billion times. It's difficult even to imagine this.

When you try to comprehend such vastness, it can cause fear and anxiety. It can cause human beings to create a divine supernatural God figure, powerful enough to be your protector. It can cause you to even believe that God hates the people you hate. God's power overcomes your lack of power. To win God's favor, people bargain with God, trying to flatter God into getting their way and being on their side. On the other hand, what is the value of knowing a God who keeps you in a perpetual state of dependency?

This kind of thinking can be temporarily soothing, but in the long run, it can turn destructive. It can cause people to fly airplanes into the World Trade Center. It helped the Nazis justify their killing of the Jews. It motivated Christians in the Crusades to kill people who were not Christians. Joshua in the Old Testament believed his God wanted him to kill all the Canaanites — men, women, and children. When unexplained mysteries baffled the citizens of Salem, Massachusetts, in the late 17th century, they responded by executing women they deemed to be the agents of Satan, who, they concluded, had caused their distress. A wise person told me, "If the God you believe in hates all the same people you do, then you know you have created God in your own image."

I'm convinced that some people who claim the ability to know and interpret how God will act and what will please the Holy One do so because it gives them a kind of authority that others have difficulty questioning.

Also, human beings have a strong desire for certitude, for being certain that they know the answers to life's mysteries and for knowing all they need to know about God. But too much certainty can be dangerous. As I mentioned earlier, it can cause you to kill people because you are certain they are enemies of God. That's what Paul was saying in his letter to the Romans in the New Testament. Listen: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"

Here's what George Will, the newspaper columnist, had to say on the subject of certainty. "The greatest threat to civility — and ultimately to civilization — is an excess of certitude. The world is much menaced just now by people who think that the world and their duties in it are clear and simple. They are certain that they know what — who — created the universe and what this creator wants them to do to make our little speck in the universe perfect, even if extreme measures — even violence — are required."

"America is currently awash in an unpleasant surplus of clanging, clashing certitudes. That is why there is a rhetorical bitterness absurdly disproportionate to our real differences. It has been well said that the spirit of liberty is the spirit of not being too sure you are right. One way to immunize ourselves against misplaced certitude is to contemplate — even savor — the unfathomable strangeness of everything, including ourselves." George Will sounds like St. Paul.

George Will went on to say, “The more you appreciate the complexity and improbability of everyday things — including yourself — the more you can understand the role that accidents, contingencies, and luck have played in bringing the human story to its current chapter. And the more you understand the vast and mysterious indeterminacy of things, the more suited you will be to participate in writing the next chapter.”

How then can you come into a relationship with God — that is, how can you know God better and at the same time admit there is always a great deal you will never know about God?

Here’s my first suggestion. You begin to know more about God when you ask the right questions and then take the right action. For example, in the case of natural disasters, instead of asking why God causes them, it is better to ask, “What can we do about it?” God has placed us in a creation where planets are continuing to be formed, where tectonic plates shift, earthquakes occur, and sometimes innocent people die. To wish it were otherwise is, in essence, to wish that we were not physical beings at all. Then we would not know pleasure, desire, achievement, freedom, virtue, creativity, vulnerability, and love. We would be totally spiritual beings, God’s computers, programmed to sing God’s praise.

To repeat what I said earlier, the religious question is therefore not, “Why did this happen?” but, “What shall we do?” That is why in synagogues, churches, and temples throughout the world, right after the tsunami, along with prayers for the injured and bereaved, people of faith got involved in the work of relief. They were saying, “God, we do not know why this and other terrifying disasters take place, but we do know you want us to help, and in so doing, we will come to know you more intimately.”

My second suggestion is: when people ask me, as they often do, “How can I come to know God more intimately?” My answer is, “Look at Jesus. Study his life and his teachings. Follow his example. Love people as he did, which means you need to love those who are unlovable, those who are the outcasts in society. That’s what he did.” Jesus is God in the flesh. The writer of the Gospel of John wrote, “The Word (the loving energy of God) became flesh and dwelt among us.”

That’s what the Apostle Peter finally understood in the story read earlier from the Gospel of Matthew. One day, Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They gave a variety of answers. And then he asked them, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Peter got it. How was he coming to know God in an intimate way? By being a follower of Jesus.

Notice next what Jesus said to Peter after he gave the right answer. He said, and I’m paraphrasing, “It’s the kind of insight and faith that you, Peter, have exhibited on which I will build my church. It will be made up of people like you. My church is to be my representative on this earth after I’m gone, and people will come to know me through that church and therefore also come to know God.”

It’s been happening over and over again for more than 2,000 years. A minister friend of mine told me this story, which took place in another city. A man came to see him who was an inactive member of the church he served. He told my colleague that one day his wife lost her mind. She came after him with a butcher knife. Their son stopped her. Then she tried to drown their nine-month-old baby. She kidnapped the two smallest children, and she disappeared with them for eight months. No one could find them. One day, they appeared on his doorstep. He

told my colleague that he had come to know the love of God through the reconciliation that took place, and especially through the help of other members of that congregation who came to their aid.

People come to this church and other congregations because they are trying to know God more intimately. Some are haunted by tragedies within their families. Others are worried about problems in the world at large. Some are worried about failures in their own life and are in despair and cannot deal with it alone. A woman remembers that her older brother was killed by her father. When he was a child, he fell off the back of the car as his father was backing up. “Oh, daddy,” he said in his father’s arms as he was dying. The father never got over it.

She came to the church seeking to know God. She needed the comfort and support of a loving community, and in that way, she came to know the love of God. The people who are our Stephen Ministers are a big help to people who are trying to know God.

I remember a young woman who came to see me. I had never met her before. She was carrying flowers. They were for the mother of one of her classmates. The classmate had taken her own life. The young woman came to see me because she needed the strength to go and visit the mother of her classmate.

Jesus was reminding Peter that the church is to be a loving community, a place where you are loved unconditionally. That’s why above the main church doors, we have the quotation from Jesus, “Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

The church is to be a place where you can come to know God through the acceptance of others. We love because God first loved us. In Jesus, you see the fullest expression of God’s love. Once you experience that love of God, the more you give it to others, the more you receive it and know God. Amen.