

Homily – The Recovery of Paradise

Rob Keim

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Once upon a time there was a baby born to a family, and the parents were very careful to prepare the baby's older sister. She was five years old and she was very excited to have a baby brother. When the parents brought the baby home the older sister was very careful and very quiet. She tried to help if she could. A few days after the baby came home the parents overheard the five year old talking to her baby brother. "Quick," she said. "Tell me who made you! Where'd you come from? I'm beginning to forget."

As we become children the patterns of life become too complex for most people. As children and then as adults we begin try to fit life into human logic. But life is so much bigger than rationale thinking and we lose track of the pattern. We lose our innocence and forget from where we came. One of the characteristics we attribute to babies is that of innocence. While they may fuss and sometimes even cause a ruckus, we still think of them as innocent. And there is something endearing about those who are innocent. Maybe they are endearing because we are searching for our own lost innocence.

Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk who died in 1968. He is credited with reviving many of the mystical spiritual traditions and practices that are becoming more and more important to us in the twenty-first century. Merton penned an essay called "The Recovery of Paradise" in which he wrote about the desert fathers and mothers of third century Egypt. These men and women were Christian hermits or ascetics who lived very simple, isolated lives in the wastelands of Egypt. They focused all of their time and energy on prayer and working to connect to God. Merton writes that the desert fathers and mothers were searching for lost innocence which they saw as the emptiness and purity of heart of which had belonged to Adam and Eve. They sought paradise in the recovery of that unity which had been shattered by the knowledge of good and evil. The desert fathers and mothers saw the recovery of innocence as a way of achieving unity and oneness with Christ.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus teaches us that the gift of being like a child is vital and necessary for entry into the kingdom of God. In fact the mystery of the kingdom is revealed only to babies and toddlers, in other words those who are not yet able to speak, and those who don't yet have all the answers. In fact babies not only lack answer, they haven't even begun to formulate the life questions that drive many of us. The message we have from Jesus is that for us to see and be close to God we have to relinquish the part of us that feels important and knowledgeable as a grown up and turn in a state of not knowing towards God. However, it is a difficult struggle for us to

move from the quest for knowledge and all of its associated questions and answers to a state of pre-knowledge in which we let go of the questions. At a prior church, the wife of the pastor used to talk about all of the questions she was going to ask God after she died. Death was going to bring answers that were elusive in this lifetime. However, I wonder if today's Gospel reading cuts off this way of thinking. Instead of finding the answers after death, we may find that we no longer care about the questions. "Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." When we let go of our demand and need for answers then we regain the innocence of the baby. And in that innocence and its associated purity of heart we walk willingly into the unknowable embrace and love of God and the kingdom of heaven.

Now, I have two stories to share with you about innocence. The first is about innocence lost. On Friday night several of us here at St. Barnabas attended a reading of a play called "Agnes of God." The play is directed by a friend and staged outdoors at the Lavra, the intentional community run by Steve and Amy, two of our parishioners. The play is about a novice nun who gives birth to a baby, and she insists that the child was the result of a virgin conception. There are only three characters in the play, Agnes, the nun, the mother superior of the convent, and a doctor or psychiatrist who examines and then tries to heal Agnes. In some ways the play is about the interplay and tension between religion, as represented by the mother superior, and science, as represented by the psychiatrist. This is a popular setup, the conflict between religion and science. I don't agree that there needs to be conflict because I think religion and science, and more specifically religion and psychiatry, actually mutually reinforce each other. Be that as it may, this stereotyped conflict tears away at the innocence of Agnes. It strips her of her childlike nature which leads to disaster. Innocence is lost. There is a lot more to the play, and I highly recommend that you watch it. There is one more free showing at the Lavra this afternoon at 3pm. If you would like information about it please see me after the service.

The second story about innocence is one that I shared earlier this year, and it is a midrash story about Adam and Eve. For many centuries Hebrew scholars have created stories to fill in the gaps in what Christians call the Old Testament. The Midrash is a large collection of stories written by Jewish rabbinic sages that are used to teach the meaning of difficult passages and concepts. The Midrash connects and extends different parts of Hebrew scripture. Even though they are not Scripture, the Midrash stories are meant to help people draw closer to God. One of my favorite examples is the story about what happened to Adam and Eve when they were booted from the Garden of Eden. You may recall that Adam and Eve ate from the tree at the center of the garden which had been forbidden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And after eating they were changed for they lost their innocence and now saw

themselves as separate from God. Their eyes were opened to a split universe of suspicion, subterfuge, doubt, and alienation. Teachers of prayer call this the subject-object split. We no longer know things through being connected to them in affinity and likeness. Instead, we have knowledge through separating and being apart from them. And by extension we separate everything between us and them. And, after Adam and Eve started seeing themselves as apart from God, the sages say they lived in a cave outside the Garden and spent the rest of their lives trying to get back into the Garden. They missed being a part of God and belonging to God. The rest of their life journey was trying to regain their innocence and get a renewed sense of belonging.

Now the Fall from the Garden of Eden is not an historic event that happened at one moment in time. Instead it is the plotline of all of our lives. Each and every one of us leaves infancy, eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and begins using our rational brains to classify and separate things so that we can understand and control. This split is something that begins in all human beings quite early, and for abused or neglected children even earlier. By the age of seven most have lost their innocence and “left the garden” and have begun to live largely in their minds, looking over at the garden. When we are young we were still able to exist in unitive consciousness. We see this in babies in their first months of life in which they think they are one with their mother. Curiously our goal in life, and especially of the spiritual journey, is to regain our innocence, get back into the Garden, and become reunited with God. And, the good news we have from Jesus is that belonging to him and to the family of God is our birthright. So try letting go of your questions, and instead live as an infant knowing, believing, and trusting that you belong to God.