

Radiance

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Jeremiah 31:7-14
John 1:1-18

I.

It is the first Sunday of the New Year, and the Sunday when we remember sages of an ancient time, following the light of a strange star to a dark corner of an occupied world. Natural that on a day like today, our minds should go searching for the first things, the most basic things. Natural to go looking for some spot of radiance. What did those magi seek? What are you and I looking for?

Close to the heart of the message of Christianity is a radical notion about what is important in this world: what it is that makes us shine. To be fully human, in the sense that Christ taught, is to love. Without Love, without that profound intimate relationship with the Other, life is empty. It is not fully human. But add love, and stir the pot—and well, something miraculous can begin to happen.

The Gospel of John begins with poetry, the poetry of a lover talking about an experience of communion bigger and deeper than life itself! Before anything was, the gospel writer tells us, this Love was. Before time got started, this forever Word was there. When creation got created, Love was there. And then finally one dark night when humanity was at its lowest ebb, this Love, this Light, took human flesh and came to be with us, to dwell among us, to make us fully human at last, to set us free, to fill us up, to deliver us from our chains, radiant love, shining through the most unexpected, the most human of faces.

That was the experience of a gospel writer in love with Jesus. A love so deep must be forever, destined from before birth and made to live forever. Have you tasted this kind of love?

II.

Now love, let us acknowledge, LOVE may be one of the most over-used words in the English language. We love this, we love that. Romance novels that end with true love ever after never fade in popularity. And we say crazy things about Love. I remember a very popular movie from my childhood entitled “Love Story” For months afterwards, years even, grown-ups were going around saying “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” Really? John Lennon disagreed, saying “Love means having to say you’re sorry every five minutes.” Love sells magazines and TV shows and movies. In our more Scrooge-like moments, we might even be tempted to echo his famous phrase: “Bah humbug.”

Only not so fast. The word Love may be overused. But living love out, costly love at any rate, is hardly over-done. The real article is not overabundant in the world in which we live.... It seems that for all the talk, all the words, Love the Word is in short supply.

Have you noticed that people who are deeply in love have a kind of radiance? I have been reminded of this recently. Perhaps it was seeing my son Luke with his bride Andi as they stood in front of us on their wedding day. I could even see it in my friend’s face in her Facebook picture lately, glowing all the way from Mexico City with joy. Chalk it up to a heightened metabolism or hormones if you insist, but people in love glow. And not only young people. Middle aged people, old people. People in love have a certain ...radiance.

III.

It is also possible to fall in love with God! And those who are in love with God also possess this radiance... it’s why we paint halos on saints! There is some kind of light that shows forth when people are deeply grounded in divine love.

And those whose love affair with God spills over into a love affair with humanity have a radiance for which we hunger.

"If we love God, if we acknowledge to whom we belong, if, in the intervals of other tasks, this love moves naturally to the surface and gives a glow to all we do, this is prayer without ceasing, perpetual prayer." So said Douglas V. Steere, a Quaker who was my father’s teacher, and tutored me a little too. Douglas had that glow himself, and not only when he looked at Dorothy his beloved wife, even in their final years. When he spoke of the light within, of the experience of contemplation, of the ways in which prayer led to action and action led to prayer, his own face gave testimony to the radiance from within. He even spoke about ecumenical relationships—relationships between those of different spiritual traditions and denominations, as “mutual irradiation”.

Douglas loved to tell his young friends the story of an ecumenical gathering with Catholic bishops and protestant divines from around the world that he hosted at Pendle Hill, a Quaker retreat center in Philadelphia, shortly after World War II. . Whoever was hosting such gatherings set the tone for worship—so this time it was Quaker meeting, where folk sit in silence until someone feels moved to speak. At this gathering, during one such meeting for worship, after prolonged silence a plainly dressed man stood suddenly and spoke with great eloquence and power. He shone. Then as suddenly as he had stood, he sat down. After the meeting he slipped away. One of the bishops attending came and asked Douglas: “Who was that man? He must be one of your leading lights.” Douglas smiled. “That was our gardener her at Pendle Hill.”

Those who are in love with God come in all ages and occupations, all orientations and traditions, all races and nations.... And when we love our fellow creatures— not only human creatures but also those that grow in gardens— that too is perpetual unceasing prayer. Radiance.

IV.

It is the first Sunday in a new year, when all the light we get in nature comes at an extreme angle, close to the horizon. It is a time of war, it is a time of wanting. As many people are suffering today as ever there were. There is hatred and mistrust to be had on every hand. An easy time to get grim. But look around, and see.

Here and there are the faces of those so full of love for God and their neighbor, full of love for God’s good earth and their fellow creatures, that their faces shine. And even when you cannot see it printed on their features their lives shine, with little gestures of self-giving, sharing when sharing is not easy, speaking out in truth sharply but with care for the listener, acting up even when to act is risky. These are the people who have chosen to root their lives in Love. Like magi from afar, they come, seeking the One who is a sign: Love’s sign of promise: humanity and creation healed. Radiance, shining through, from a manger, and from thee and me.