

Rainbows and Friends

Genesis 9.8-17

John 15.12-17

February 15, 2009

“I’m putting my rainbow in the clouds, a sign of the covenant between me and the Earth. From now on, when I form a cloud over the Earth and the rainbow appears in the cloud, I’ll remember my covenant between me and you and everything living...”

- God to Noah in Genesis 9 (*The Message*)

I know the promise of the rainbow. I keep thinking I’ll turn a corner one day and find a litany of rainbows flung across the sky, hosannaing back and forth through all the ages and out into eternity forever amen! Every tear wiped away – it’s a promise – when we become rainbows to each other.

- Ann Weems

The Gospel Reading

‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

One Is Enough

On the first Sunday of her new ministry, a pastor delivered an inspiring sermon. It was articulate, it was eloquent, it was profound, and it was bold. At its conclusion the congregation – to a person – added its amen. She really hit a home run today, one man told the chair of the search committee. Statements like, Wow! We really made the right choice, or, That’s the pastor for us, could be heard all around. Needless to say, the congregation returned with excitement to worship the next week, only to hear the same sermon. It was still eloquent, still

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profound; but it was the mirror image of the week before. The congregation let this mistake slide; after all, she had just moved into town and was probably still unpacking. But when the same sermon was featured the following week, grumblings of dissatisfaction could be heard from the parking lot after worship. It was agreed that, should she preach the same sermon again, the chair of the search committee would address the issue in no uncertain terms. Sure enough, when worship time rolled around again, the pastor stood up before the congregation and, without shame, delivered the same sermon ...to a word, the same sermon. Enough is enough, thought the search committee chair. Approaching the pastor, he began gently, although with thinly disguised irritation, Pastor, we love you already, he said, and are excited about the possibility of our ministry together; but you have been here four weeks, and have preached the same sermon each week. That's right, she responded with a sly grin, and just as soon as I see any indication that you have listened to it; I'll move on to a new one.

I'm not going to repeat last week's sermon this morning, but I would like to continue the theme it introduced; the notion that our image of God – our notion of who God is and how God relates to us - affects the nature and quality of our faith experience. This image can make the difference between a somber, dutiful, and quiet faith; and an exuberant, joyful faith. For a few moments, therefore, I would like to reflect on our image of God and its impact on faith. Let's begin with a prayer.

Gracious One, though we repeat our words time and again, we pray that the Spirit speaking through them will be fresh and vital. We pray that your wisdom – that your very reality - will strip them away like so much chaff, and be present among us to empower us, engage us, and challenge us to go out as your friends into the world to share news that truly is good. In the name of the Christ we pray. Amen.

The Rainbow's Promise

Rainbows and friends seems an odd choice for a sermon title; but in truth there is a real, if subtle, connection between the two. Ann Weems says that she knows the promise of the rainbow, and I'm sure you do as well. I'm sure you know God's promise through Noah to all of humankind - and to every living creature as well – to cease any and all destructive activity, and to be henceforth and forevermore the God of creation and creative activity, the God of peace and compassion, the God of faithfulness and loyalty. I will put my bow in the clouds and any

time it becomes visible it will remind me of the promise that I have made to you. That beautiful multi-colored rainbow would be a reminder to God of the divine promise of peace.

The rainbow promise becomes more powerful yet when we recognize the interplay between bow and rainbow in the Genesis narrative. In antiquity, it seems, rainbows inspired not wonder but fear; they symbolized weapons of war with which gods slung arrows into the hearts of their enemies, divine and human alike. Thus, the bow that they saw in the sky was not admired for its beauty, but feared for its destructive power. In this context, it is quite significant that God chooses to put his bow in the clouds; it is significant that God chooses to put away his WMD's and become the God of peace. I can almost hear God humming the ol' African-American Spiritual, *Down by the Riverside*, while putting away God's weapons. Do you remember its words? Gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside; I ain't gonna study war no more.

God Thinks the World of You

Jesus knew the promise of the rainbow. That is why he was able to say to his disciples - and through them to you and me - I no longer call you slaves, but friends. How else could Jesus regard those to whom God had made such a promise? Not as slaves, but as friends; friends living together, walking together, being together through good times and bad, being open and comfortable and casual with each other. In Jesus, the promise of the rainbow becomes the promise of friendship.

Our choir is going to perform a beautiful anthem later in our gathering, *Be Still my Soul*, an anthem that affirms the rainbow's promise of friendship and peace. Be still my soul, the Lord is on your side, the song begins. This is good news; this is the good news that we talk about day after day, week after week, and year after year. Be still, my soul, the Lord is on your side. We might even state the promise more poignantly even if crassly; God thinks the world of you ...literally. Let me say that again, God thinks the world of you ...literally; and by you I mean every you: every woman, child, and man gathered in this place. God thinks the world of you.

Our Jewish brothers and sisters take quite seriously this affirmation of God's love for each and every individual. They have enshrined it in a saying; when you kill an individual you

lose the universe. That is to say, in the eyes of God, every individual is worth as much as the universe as a whole. God thinks the world of you ...literally; and that's why Jesus can call his disciples, friends.

Dufflepuds and BFF's

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, one volume in C. S. Lewis' wonderful series of children's novels, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Edmund, Lucy, and Prince Caspian run into a curious group of individuals on the Island of Voices, which they eventually dub the Dufflepuds. They were monopods, these Dufflepuds, with but one leg right in the center of their torso. To move about they had to hop like bunnies; so you can imagine the mess they made when they attempted to take food from kitchen to table! These curious creatures were governed by a wizard through rule of law and fear of punishment. They obeyed the mysterious wizard because they feared him. So it should come as no surprise that they avoided him whenever possible. He was evil, dark, and dangerous in their view. What they didn't know, however, was that the wizard governed by fear not by choice, but by necessity. The Dufflepuds weren't ready to respond to anything else. It was fear, or nothing at all. And this saddened the wizard, who wanted nothing more than to embrace them in love; nothing more than to call them friends.

The Dufflepuds weren't ready for the intimacy of true friendship; they weren't ready to invest themselves in each other: to be there with and for each other. Their relationships were as simple as they were external, and all based on fear. The situation of the Duffelpuds might well represent the faith of many; those who think of God as a tough taskmaster, as a commander, as a judge they dutifully obey in fear. Is it any wonder they hide from such a God; is it any wonder they avoid this God whenever possible? This, however, is not the way God wants to relate to us. God wants to be our friend; God wants to be with us ...not above us; God wants to accompany and bless us ...not to demand obedience in fear. God wants us to be our friend.

This is a significant understanding of faith ...and it is rare. Not just anyone is willing to base her faith on living, breathing relationship more than anything else. Such faith is not based on beliefs about God: on dogma or creed; it's not based on allegiance to church or

denomination. Rather, it is based on a living and dynamic experience of God in Christ, a friendship that's yours day after day, week after week, year after year.

You may be aware that some churches have designated today Evolution Sunday. Pastors across the nation have been encouraged to devote the day's worship to the topic; either to praise evolution or to bash it. I have to tell you, I much prefer Friendship Sunday. I'm not afraid of controversy; it's just that I have absolutely no interest in wasting worship time talking about evolution or any other controversy of the day. Don't get me wrong, I have every confidence in science; and I have every confidence in faith. But my faith is not based on whether or not I affirm or deny this or that scientific principle. My faith is based on a living, breathing relationship with God. I can be wrong about evolution ...but that won't take away my friendship with God. I could care less about Evolution Sunday, but I do care deeply for the friendship of faith, because it brings us into living relationships with God that touch and transform our daily lives.

Friendship in faith should also guide our relationships with each other. I don't mean the kind of friendship espoused by someone like Paris Hilton; I don't mean a BFF. Do you know what this means? Anybody? Oh, don't you use Face Book? Don't you have My Space? Good gracious alive! Well, according to the internet language abbreviations, BFF stands for best friends forever. This is a friendship Paris Hilton might recommend; but this is not the friendship God wants to share.

God doesn't want to be your best friend forever, conveniently overlooking the times you don't live up to your potential; encouraging a mutual admiration society in which you and your friends tower above all others in being cool or hip; or hangin' at the mall. God doesn't want to be your best friend forever; but God wants an intimate friendship with you based on love and faithfulness. God will affirm you; God will never abandon you; and God will draw you out of yourself into a life of friendships with others as well as with God.

Rainbows and friends, there should be plenty to go around; because when we live as friends, with God and with each other, we become walking rainbows. We become signs of God's rainbow promise to be all about peace, creativity, compassion, and joy. Amen.