

NOW AND EVER: LOVE THAT NEVER ENDS; COLOSSIANS 1:11-20, LUKE 23:33-43; 11.27.19 GENEROSITY SUNDAY; THOMAS H. YORTY

A colleague tells about the talk a forest ranger gave before hiking in Grand Teton National Park. The ranger gave advice on what to do if he encountered a grizzly bear on his path – band together, make plenty of noise, have bear spray attached to your belt, be downwind if and when you use it; it's effective but don't spray until the bear gets within 30 feet otherwise the cloud will dissipate. I'm not sure I'd call that effective.

If the spray fails, lie down on the ground, face in the dirt, hands on neck, legs slightly spread. Keep your backpack on. It creates a little distance between you and the bear. And then this final helpful advice: if you are risk averse keep your distance. Sightsee from your car. Study wild animals in a magazine.

My colleague concluded there are parallels here in our relationship with God – if you want to get close to the Lord, there are risks involved.

Indeed. But what do we mean when we refer to the risk of getting too close to God? You can lump much of it under one word: change. We are creatures of habit. We get set in our ways and we don't like being forced out of our comfort zones.

You can see that dynamic play out when Fred Buechner after graduating from Princeton University, went to New York City where he wrote a successful first novel; but then working on his second book couldn't find his muse, and the question of what he was doing with his life loomed over him.

As he tells the story, he was listening to a sermon at Madison Ave. Presbyterian Church, it was at the time Elizabeth was crowned Queen of England, and the preacher asked if his listeners had crowned Jesus in their hearts as King and Sovereign of their lives. Buechner says the shock of it was like being slapped across the face. He burst into tears and knew in that moment that Jesus was the answer to his aimless, empty life.

Everything changed; he started attending church more regularly, got to know the pastor – George Buttrick, once pastor of First Church, Buffalo. Eventually he enrolled in Union Theological Seminary where he was surprised to discover a desire to be ordained.

Buechner said never could he have imagined he'd be attending seminary one day.

Then, in that first year at Union, when he went to his paternal grandparents for Thanksgiving, his grandmother, a rather imperious figure, looked down the long dining room table laden with crystal and china and inquired of her grandson what he was doing with his life. Silence descended upon the conversations around the table, and as all eyes turned to him, Buechner said, "I am attending seminary." To which his grandmother replied, "Was that your idea or were you ill-advised?"

It's risky getting too close to the Lord. Of course, what Buechner's grandmother didn't know is that going to seminary is not a very good way to get close to God, but for her it appeared that her family was getting too close to religion and the church. The business of the church is to marry, bury and baptize, but any more involvement than that runs the risk of associating with people who don't look exactly like you and whose company may unsettle you. It may mean changing your philanthropic portfolio. It may even mean taking to heart Jesus's teaching to turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, pray for your enemies, feed the hungry.

We Presbyterians relish decorum, order and appearance in part because, like the hiker's backpack, it keeps a certain distance between us and the Almighty.

There is irony in the church's motto: to do things decently and in order, especially in our worship. The very place where we would expect to meet God, liturgical routine can stultify our spiritual senses, yet the slightest change leaves us feeling dangerously exposed. From the pulpit to the pews we think we can hide from God in intellectual sermons and eloquent prayers or we get nervous if the order is changed for some experiment like the liturgical dancers we tried once and almost blew the top off the sanctuary. There are risks in getting close to God.

We are Adam and Eve after they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and knew they were naked and thought they could hide from God in the garden. But God came walking in the cool of the morning and found them. Just as God comes walking in the service of worship – or anywhere we think we can hide from God – and finds us in a turn of phrase in a prayer or hymn or in the still small voice of silence.

We are the one lost sheep and whether we know it or not God is in search of us, lost in our wildernesses. He comes, striding through our over-scheduled lives, uncovering our painful memories, speaking through our broken covenants to bring us home.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of a man – a preacher – who nursed his wife until her death from cancer at age 51. When she stopped breathing he said the silence in the room destroyed all language for him. No words could get into him and none could get out. He resigned from his church. Months later his voice was still raspy. It makes you want to go to Dachau, he said. You want to go to the place where there are no answers. He did not sound angry when he said that. He sounded like someone who had been scorched by the living God and who knew better than to try and talk about it. Yes, there's risk in getting close to God.

But until those holy encounters we shroud our lives, cover ourselves up, keep our secrets and burdens buried; and we do it with busy schedules and empty words that leave little room for silence and reflection; words not unlike the words that came out of the impeachment proceedings that were not intended to challenge the indisputable testimony of the witnesses but to muddy the water and divert attention from the truth.

Distraction. Obfuscation. It can seem, as it does right now with wars, rumors of wars and children separated from parents living in detention centers on our border that we have been left up to our own devices too long; and we wonder, like one member of the Year with the Bible class wondered, if God is taking a vacation from the world.

Or, couldn't we ask if it is we who have been hiding too long from God and are now suffering the consequences of our unwillingness to step forward, relinquish control, and crown Jesus Lord and Sovereign of our lives.

I received three newspaper clippings last week in the wake of the annual Pew survey of religion in America. Each article sounded the alarm: the drop in church membership is big generation to generation. I know the arguments about Puritanical sex and conservative politics that keep young people away. But could it also be that the mainline church's reticence to speak about a God whom we know personally in our daily life, largely because that is not a God we know, plays a role and does not compel our own young people who grew up in the church or those who visit to stay?

Let me be clear – this church through its long and distinguished history has not made a practice of hiding from God. There have been many brave moments of ministry when we have been in sync with Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

But the question is where in our personal lives and where in our collective life can we come out from behind whatever it is we are still using to keep our distance from God.

I'm saying we're not perfect; if we are to make progress reaching across Main St. to new partnerships on the East Side, if we are to grow our Sunday School and bring more young people here to discern what their calling in this complicated world is; if this campus that is home not just to us but to two hundred families whose children are at our school and dozens of groups and hundreds of people who come to this campus to learn and grow, to stay sober, to manage their anger, to find companionship and a meal in a lonely world; if we are to keep this sanctuary in the manner in which it has been kept by our predecessors, what will it take?

Bear with me: it will take money. There's a reason money appears in the bible far more than any other topic – 2,000 times, more than love, prayer, healing you name it.

Why? Because we are more resistant to hearing about money, or hearing anyone tell us what to do with our money than we are to hearing about love or prayer or the need for healing. We play deaf, we forget, we plead exceptions, we find ways to avoid the message. So it takes 2,000 references to get us to listen, to expose our wallets and bank accounts and investments to the will of God.

Is that getting too close to God? Only you can judge. But I can tell you that our annual giving has been hovering at \$600,000 too long – during the longest bull market in history! Not all of us have stock portfolios but a lot of us do. I believe that we could break that \$600,000 barrier and fund our annual needs and keep our draw from invested funds at 5% v. 9.5%; and preserve that little nest egg to embolden us to take more collective risk rather than find ways to avoid personal risk. The difference is \$250,000. Could we raise \$850,000 for 2020? Absolutely!

Now consider our lessons. St. Paul urges the Colossian church to live a life worthy of the teachings they have received from Jesus, a life pleasing to God. Apparently, not all churches do. Paul reminds his readers that Jesus is the head of the church; through him we find our purpose and destiny; sounds like what happens when we get close to God.

Luke takes us right up front, to the foot of the cross; so close we can hear the conversation between the criminals and Jesus and the onlookers and soldiers. It takes a criminal to show us what is worthy and pleasing to God; what placing our life in Jesus' life looks like. This is Luke's parting shot to the pious people who thought that because they'd checked all the boxes on their religious score card – goes to church, volunteers, makes annual pledge – that they had God confined to a list.

But it's the criminal who gets close to Jesus, trusts his kingship and promise of new life. There's no other way to find God or have God find you than come out from behind whatever it is that shields your heart from his love. Of course, if we are risk averse we can keep our distance, stay in the car, sightsee, or read about abundant life in a magazine; and by all means keep God out of our money decisions. Or, we can ask him what to give.

I can tell you there are two couples in this room who took that risk. They turned over the part of their life called “money” to a different process this year. They both ended up giving more to Westminster than they ever gave before and more than they ever gave to any organization before.

They surprised themselves. They changed. They didn’t run into a grizzly financial disaster. They trusted that their generosity would be pleasing to God and is what this church that belongs to Jesus needs right now. And I suspect they trusted that their needs and their finances would be just fine down the road. It’s a partnership with a God to whom they decided to get closer; I can see it in their faces and hear it in their voices.

That could be anyone of us. Maybe it’s you and me today. I’m just a preacher. I don’t claim to be able to read God’s mind. But I do know God is at work in this place and he wants the best for all of us; and he also wants to use us to help this community find its best.

So, go ahead, peek around the corner, he’s here waiting for you and me, like a lover, with open arms. And if that’s too scary, you can start by just being friends. Amen.