

Sermon 3rd Sunday after Epiphany Year C 2025 (All Saints)

Gospel Luke 4: 14-21

Mystery, Humility, and Love in Action

As you know in the Episcopal Church as well as other churches the choice of the readings of scripture we do every Sunday is established by the lectionary, what we call the Revised Common Lectionary. So, regardless of what Episcopal Church you attend on any given Sunday morning, either in the United States or abroad, you will hear the same readings. In seminary we are encouraged to preach on one of those readings. For instance, today in most of our churches you would hear the preacher talking about Jesus' preaching in the synagogue in Nazareth, when he reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and tells his hometown folks that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him, and that he is the anointed one, saying: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." If you read a little farther, you would see that the comments Jesus makes following his sermon, in particular about the favorable treatment God gives to foreigners, didn't go over so well, and "all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill...so that they might hurl him off the cliff." Fortunately they didn't succeed, and Jesus passed through them and went on his way. The sermon this morning will be a little different. I will eventually get back to the gospel reading and we will see an example of that gospel in action, but we will take a somewhat circuitous route getting there.

The title of this sermon is "Mystery, Humility, and Love in Action." We will talk about mystery and what it has to do with faith. We will talk about certainty and doubt—certainty as a hindrance to faith and doubt as an opening into it. And we will end with a look at humility and love in action. A lot to unravel, but I will try to connect the dots.

Webster's defines "mystery" as "something not understood or beyond understanding." A synonym is enigma. The Greek word for "mysteries" is

“mysteria” meaning “hidden things...truths not accessible by the power of human reason alone.” This begs the question, “Is there truth beyond the power of human reason alone?” I hope to make the case that yes, there is an infinite space filled with truths beyond the power of our human reasoning. We can start with St. Paul. He gets at this in his letter to the Philippians, when he writes about “the peace of God that surpasses all understanding...” (Philippians 4:7)

Cynthia and I were watching the movie “Conclave” a couple of weeks ago. Maybe some of you have seen it. It is about the Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church gathering in the Vatican to select a new pope, following the sudden unexpected death of the prior pope. It’s a fascinating story, and I won’t go much further into it now, but there is one line that especially caught my attention. Cardinal Thomas Lawrence is the dean of the cathedral, and the person charged with leading the other 118 cardinals from all over the world, now huddled together in secret in the Vatican, going through this ancient process of electing a new pope. The process is called “conclave.” At one point Cardinal Lawrence, who had recently experienced his own crisis of faith, makes this comment: “There is one sin which I have come to fear above all else...certainty. Certainty is the great enemy of unity...the deadly enemy of tolerance. Our faith is a living thing precisely because it walks hand in hand with doubt. If there was only certainty and no doubt, there would be no mystery and therefore no need for faith.” To simplify it somewhat: “Without doubt there is no mystery, and without mystery there is no faith.” No—and I am by no means the first to say this —“the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.” Kathleen Norris is a poet and author of several books about faith and Christianity. She struggled with belief and faith, and had doubts and intellectual frustrations over some of the creeds and dogmas of Christianity. In her struggle and in search for help she met an old monk at the Benedictine abbey. He relieved some of that anxiety when he told her this: “Doubt is a seed of faith, a sign that faith is alive and ready to grow.” Doubt and uncertainty and ambiguity are openings that can

guide us and encourage our search for the truth within those wonderful mysteries—mysteries like Spirit, the Eucharist, even God—mysteries that add salt to life; and to develop faith in those truths. They implore us to use our imaginations to explore the truth within the mystery. The imagination is that gift which opens us to possibilities we have not considered before. Jim has told us that Samuel Taylor Coleridge, founder of the English Romanticism movement, went so far as to see the imagination as the Holy Spirit within us and at work in us.

A few years ago Gail Bramer gave Cynthia and me a book by Eric Stensland called Whispers in the Wilderness. He is a photographer and I would add wisdom figure who lives in the Rocky Mountain National Park, where he does photography and writes reflections about nature and about life. His time alone in nature has led him to explore the hidden wilderness that resides not only in the beauty of the Rocky Mountain National Park, but also deep within us all. Hidden within the depths of the mystery of that wilderness, of that “wildness” within us and within all of creation, is wisdom that in our busy and chaotic world we have forgotten. We now live in a world where the scientific perspective dominates. Indeed, discoveries of science have provided us with wonderful things—vast new areas of understanding that have transformed our lives. But at the same time this quest for an analytical understanding of “how things work”—which is what science does—can blind us to the meaning of “why” things are. We often overlook or disregard the deeper aspects of human experience, the intangibles that make life worth living. Things like awe, wonder, beauty, and love cannot be measured or categorized by the scientific method. They exist within the realm of mystery. Creation itself is full of beauty and wonder. And are they not some of the most meaningful experiences of all? Are they not full of truth? A quote from Dennis Covington: “Mystery is not the absence of meaning, but the presence of more meaning than we can comprehend.” We may not and need not comprehend those mysteries with our

heads, but we can experience them in our hearts. Therein do we find the truth. There is a big spiritual world out there, beyond what we can know with our senses. It cannot be measured, only experienced. I have found that knowledge to be the source of great comfort in my life, perhaps the bedrock of my own faith. Have you, as have I, struggled with some of the ideas, creeds, and teachings of the church? Have they been a hindrance to your faith? Have you sometimes felt, as I have heard said before, that you had to leave your intellect at the door upon entering the church? If so I encourage you to think otherwise. There are greater truths than these among us. Be open to the possibility of experiencing them both here within the walls of our church, and outside those walls.

I mentioned Kathleen Norris above. One of her books is Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith, one chapter of which is titled “Belief, Doubt, and Sacred Ambiguity.” She begins the chapter with the verse in Mark’s Gospel about the healing of the child with seizures. The father of the boy approaches Jesus, asking him to heal his child. He asks Jesus “...if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus says to him, “...All things can be done for the one who believes.” Immediately the father cries out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” It is one of my favorite verses in all of scripture. “I believe; help my unbelief.” Who among us does not have doubts? Who among us is always certain? Who among us has such a firm grasp of the truth that we never question? Question our tradition, our creeds? Question our very faith? Question them because we cannot somehow “prove” their truth? I believe that it is those very doubts and uncertainties that open us to searching for and finding truth in the experience of the heart, those experiences that cannot be measured and cannot be explained or even understood, and yet are real.

What does this all mean for us? I believe it means that we accept and embrace our uncertainties and doubt, that we recognize that our perspective on reality is limited, that we don’t have all the answers, that this God we seek is in

many ways unknowable, that we embrace the mystery of never fully knowing. One fruit of this acknowledgement is humility. Humility as opposed to pride. Humility that offers us the freedom to say “I don’t know,” to be uncertain, to have doubts, and yet still have faith. Humility is an opening into love, love as Jesus says in the gospel today, which “brings good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, that will let the oppressed go free.”

As Episcopalians and as all people in this kind of love, we celebrate the bold and courageous words spoken by Bishop Mariann Budde from the pulpit this week at the Inauguration prayer service at the National Cathedral. She spoke directly to Donald Trump, appealing to him to have mercy on our immigrant neighbors, our trans kids, to allay the fears of the children now living in fear of having their parents taken from them, to like Jesus show mercy and compassion. Her sermon was about unity, about sacrificial love, about honesty, about the Biblical call to care for all our neighbors, especially the marginalized, about the United States’ Declaration of Independence with its assertion of “innate human equality and the inherent dignity of every human being,” about humility. This is how she ended:

“Let me make one final plea, Mr. President...in the name of God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now. There are transgender children in both Republican and Democrat families who fear for their lives. And the people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings; who labor in our poultry farms and meat-packing plants; who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants and work the night shift in hospitals—they may not be citizens or have the proper documentation, but the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. They pay taxes, and are good neighbors. They are faithful members of our churches, mosques and synagogue, gurdwara and temples. Have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away. Help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here. Our God

teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were once strangers in this land. May God grant us all the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being, speak the truth in love, and walk humbly with one another and our God, for the good of all the people of this nation and the world.”

She spoke truth to power, and did it with humility and love. Much of the response to Bishop Budde’s message, including the response of Donald Trump himself, has been a lot like the one Jesus received following his comments about God caring for the foreigners, the strangers, the outcasts. Those people tried to throw Jesus off a cliff. But there has also been a lot of support for her actions, including mine and Jim’s and I know many of yours. This is our faith in action. This is Christianity as I think Jesus of the gospels would want it to be.

Rev. Bob Donnell