

'Face to face'. Sermon first preached at FUMC Palmetto, 3rd August 2008

There is nothing like a face to face encounter, is there? This may be a bad thing or it may be a good thing. If we have been missing someone, we may send a letter, an email, we may make a phone call, but there is no substitute for seeing the person, in the flesh, to meet face to face. But when we are at odds with someone or have something difficult to communicate, we may be reluctant for a face to face encounter. Many years ago I needed to tell my mother something which I thought would cause her great distress. I knew that I had to be there in person to tell her, yet, I feared that if I could see the expression on her face, I might not bring myself to do it. So before I drove the 200 miles from where I was at university to her home, I wrote a letter. Soon after I arrived, I gave her the letter and left her alone for a while to read it. Then we talked face to face. It can be so difficult to see the sadness, the disappointment, any negative emotion on someone's face. Conversely, there is no substitute for seeing the positive emotion on someone's face. This is why a simple smile can light up our day.

So what about Jacob and his face to face encounters? What is it like for Jacob to see God face to face? Jacob, you may remember, had tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright (Gen. 25:29-34) and out of their father's blessing which rightfully belonged to Esau as the eldest son (Gen. 27). In the section of the story that comes just before the wrestling match we read this morning, Jacob prepares a present or a 'blessing' for Esau, but this is a sort of bribe, a way to make Esau forget his anger against him. (Gen. 32:20) This is not going to work. When they meet, there is a great surprise. It is not so much that Esau is not persuaded by the bribe. It is that Esau simply is not interested in any bribe. He runs to meet Jacob, embraces and kisses him and weeps. 'Nothing in the story prepares the reader for this astonishing scene. We have been seeing Esau only through the lens of the earlier story of Jacob's trickery and lately through the eyes of a terrified Jacob. But the wonder of Esau is that he has completely forgiven his wretched brother.'¹ It takes Jacob quite a while to grasp this. He is still busy addressing Esau formally as 'my lord' and trying to offer his gifts. Esau is content simply to have a loving relationship with his brother. He keeps calling Jacob 'my brother'. He has his brother back. This is enough for him. It is forgiveness that breaks the cycle of revenge

Deliberately in the Jacob cycle of stories in Genesis, divine and human figures are interchangeable. Divine and human blessing are intertwined. Divine and human love are inseparable. As Jacob had seen the face of God in the struggle and reconciliation with the unnamed wrestler, so Jacob sees the face of God in the face of his reconciled enemy/brother who had sought to kill him. In both cases, Jacob encounters the beloved whom he had perceived in some way as an enemy, one divine and one human. In both cases, Jacob emerges from the struggle with greater blessings and a more abundant life. Jacob says more than he knows when he exclaims to his reconciled brother: 'Truly to see you face is like seeing the face of God.' (Gen. 33:10) In the open-hearted forgiveness of Esau, one can certainly and plainly see the face of God.

Let's reflect for a moment on the riches of the word for 'face' in the Old Testament. In Hebrew, the word is *panim*. This particular word always occurs in the plural, perhaps indicative of the fact that the face is a combination of features. The face identifies a person and reflects the attitude and sentiments of the person. The face is extraordinarily revealing of a person's emotions, moods, and dispositions.

At the burial two weeks ago of Stephen's Aunt Thelma, Thelma Say, for whom we have been praying in the bulletin many months. Thelma's daughter, Joy said something that I found particularly poignant. As she looked at her mother before the service began, she said, disappointment mingled with her sadness, 'She never held her mouth like that.' For most, if not all of us, it is difficult to look on the face of someone we've loved when all the activity has gone out of it finally. Indeed, one of my three brothers chose not to view my mother, preferring, he said, to remember her as she was. As Joy remarked when looking at her mother in the casket, it was strange not to see a smile on her lips. 'She never held her mouth like that.' We know so well, don't we, the facial expressions of someone we love. Sometimes the mouth may be turned down in disapproval, but best of all the mouth turns up in the smile of love. So the Hebrew Bible tries to capture how God is to and for us by describing his face. It speaks of God's face 'shining' as a sign of favor and good will (Ps.4:6). It speaks of seeing God's face in worship (eg Ps. 42:2), but because God is

¹ Michael E Williams ed *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible: Genesis* 1991, Abindon Press p 159

so holy, there is the thought that it is too much for human beings in present circumstances to see God 'face to face'. The Hebrew people were acutely aware of the danger of reducing God to the material and so images were rejected. Yet, they were just as aware of reducing the divine presence to an abstraction. So by speaking of God's face, *panim*, they could get somewhere between the two dangers. They could draw on what we experience in human life, of seeing someone's face and all that it communicates from that person to us, to speak of our experience of God.

Lyn sang to us in worship last week the moving song: 'I can only imagine'. That's true: I can only imagine what heaven will be like. So with humility this morning, let us use our imagination as we think about seeing God face to face. What is it like to see God face to face? Is it a good thing or a bad thing? What will it be like?

Paul gives us the vital clue, I believe. In the passage in I Corinthians 13 he speaks of the centrality of love and he says that 'now we see in a mirror dimly but then we shall see face to face.' When we look and act through the eyes of love in the present life, we see God: that is we seeing clearly. To see clearly is to see things as they are and to see things as they are meant to be. In the present life, even our clear-sightedness may be a bit dim; but in the future, in heaven, whatever we want to call it, we shall see with crystal clarity. Seeing God face to face is then firstly, seeing things as they are and secondly, seeing things as they are meant to be.

The Scottish poet, Edwin Muir had some very traumatic teenage years. Wrenched from his rural paradise on a remote Orkney island into inner city Glasgow, he lost his mother, father, brother, and sister in the space of a few years. Then he meets his wife to be, Wilma and life begins again. He writes to her a love poem, called 'The Confirmation'. Here it is:

Yes, yours my love is the right human face,
I in my mind had waited for this long.
Seeing the false and searching the true,
Then I found you as a traveler finds a place
Of welcome suddenly amid the wrong
Valleys and rocks and twisting roads.
But you, what shall I call you?
A fountain in a waste.
A well of water in a country dry.
Or anything that's honest and good, an eye
That makes the whole world bright.
Your open heart simple with giving, gives the primal deed.
The first good world, the blossom, the blowing seed.
The hearth, the steadfast land, the wandering sea,
Not beautiful or rare in every part
But like yourself, as they were meant to be.

You may well be very familiar with the following folktale about a man who died. After he left the earth, he was shown a banquet hall, in which tables were loaded down with rich food. He was certain he had gone to heaven. At the ringing of a dinner bell, the inhabitants of that place rushed into the room. But all had long spoons tied to each hand, so that they were unable to feed themselves. Nevertheless, they tried frantically to get the food to their mouths, until some attendants came to drive them from the hall. Then the newcomer understood that he was in hell, and he begged to be shown heaven instead. He was taken to another place, where the above scene was repeated. There was the banquet hall, the food, the inhabitants with spoons strapped to their hands. But here each person employed the long spoon to feed his or her neighbor.

What do I hope heaven is like? Well, I too hope it has plenty of rich food, in particular, cheesecake and crême brulee. But it can't be just for me, can it? Oh dear, I might think, as I hear this folktale. There are still going to be people there, people I might not have chosen to spend the evening with, let alone eternity.

Moreover, it is in the very sharing of the rich food that people experience the joy of eternity, seeing God face to face.

Jesus often pictures heaven as a banquet. And we speak of our Holy Communion as an anticipation of the heavenly banquet prepared for humankind. Note this, for humankind. The heavenly banquet will not just be for my friends and family, nor just for the friends and family of any one of you. Fortunately, we do not do the inviting to the heavenly banquet. Nor does any one of us do the inviting to our foretaste of the heavenly banquet. When we show up at the altar rail this morning, we will be with those we know well and those, regrettably, we hardly know at all (that's mainly the aim of our fellowship supper club, isn't it – that there will come a time when we know – at least a little better - everyone with whom we worship). There may be people here in this anticipation of the heavenly banquet with whom we wouldn't usually share a meal, people we wouldn't naturally be drawn to as friends. And, it will be the same with God's heavenly banquet, when we see God face to face. There will be faces, that is, there will be individuals and to be heaven we will need compassion and generosity. As the folktale teaches us, there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.

We might have hoped that in heaven we finally might get a bit of peace and quiet. We might get to be alone with God or at least only with those we would choose to invite. Not a bit of it. We can only use images and pictures for all this. We can indeed 'only imagine'. But Jesus, both in his ministry on earth and in his parables about heaven is real clear. We see him and we thus see God in the face of the one in need. You remember the parable of the sheep and the goats. Jesus captures so well the shock, the incredulity of both those to whom he shows his face, whom he accepts, and from those he hides his face, those whom he rejects. Both groups say with incredulity: 'When did we see you?' When did we see you, like those following Jesus in our gospel story this morning, hungry; when did we see you? Those who have helped those in need have helped not knowing that in so doing they have helped Jesus. Those rejected from the kingdom of heaven say: 'If we'd see you, we'd have done something'. And Jesus says, 'But you did see me'. You saw me in the face in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and those in prison. But you didn't recognize me. You've no excuse, says Jesus, for not recognizing God. We may say that we don't know what it's like to see God, We may fall into the danger of making God an abstraction. But we have the human face of God in Jesus. And we have the human face of Jesus in others.

So many centuries earlier than Jesus, Jacob has to learn the vital connection between love of God and love of neighbor. In order to see God face to face he has to see the face of his brother, Esau. In his encounter with his adversary, Jacob has an encounter with the Divine. So he calls the place, 'Peniel', meaning 'face of God', for he says, 'I have seen God face to face.' It is quite a mysterious story and has a variety of meanings at different levels, for individuals and for the people of God as a whole. One thing is for certain, however, and that is that it involves struggle with what comes naturally to us in our relationships with God and with other people. When Jacob is renamed 'Israel', meaning 'one who strives with God or God strives', God says to him: 'for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' 'The power of the stranger is as much in his inscrutability as in his strength. Jacob anticipates the wrath of his brother. But first he must face an assault from the deity. In the middle of the night, the forms merge and overlap.... In the night, the divine antagonist tends to take on the features of others with whom we struggle in the day.'²

So, Jesus' earliest disciples have to be reminded of the same vital connection between love of God and love of neighbor. You get the feeling with the 5000+ people that Jesus calls his disciples' bluff. Why do you want to get rid of them? It's not as if the people are asking for food. The disciples simply want to withdraw, just as Jesus had at the beginning of the story. It is quite a legitimate desire. They want respite. They want to be quiet with God. But, for now, this has to be postponed because loving God in the closeness of prayer is inseparably bound up with loving God in compassionate action. If the one does not issue in the other, there is, we may conclude, something amiss in the prayer.

² Walter Brueggemann *Interpretation: Genesis* (1982), John Knox Press p 267

So, when we finally see God face to face, will it be a good experience or a bad experience? According to our folktale about the people with the spoons and according to Jesus' parables such as the sheep and the goats, it will depend on how far, in our face to face meetings with human beings we have learned to love. If we have not learned what love is, then we will have difficulty sharing in the heavenly banquet. If we have learned to love, then we will be overjoyed to participate, knowing that we see things as they are and as they were meant to be.

I close with the most ancient of prayers:

The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine
upon you, and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance
upon you, and give you
peace. Amen