

Their Faces Cry Out

Always and forever, human beings are looking for God in all the wrong places. It's what we might be best at in life. God is a mystery, and that mystery means we might not always look in the right places for a divine encounter. When something's mysterious, our minds can't accept the fact that they're just things we won't fully understand. And so, we create boxes in which to place these mysterious things, boxing them in with words and ideas so that we can feel like we have some sort of mastery over the mystery, even when that mystery is God.

The whole of human history shows this. We write books, call them sacred, and then pretend as if God can't be found anywhere else. We make religious systems, like our own beloved Episcopal Church, and within those systems create lists of rules to follow in order to elicit God's favor and perhaps then have a divine encounter. Even the most beautiful and sublime liturgy, the most beautiful service of all time, can become one of those wrong places if we ever believe that the ritual alone is why we do these things. A strange fact of life is that even the holy things we love the most can become barriers in our quest to find God.

Truly, there's great danger when God becomes so divorced from the reality of our lives. There's great danger when God is seen as something primarily to be written and debated about, a concept ultimately bereft of meaning, evacuated of any real existence. This is what I see happening in this unwise confrontation between the teacher of the law and the God behind the law. *When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"* In this moment, they aren't interested in holiness and righteousness.

They came at Jesus with deceitful designs, designs on tricking him and thus having a reason to discount and ignore everything he had to say. “If we discredit him, he'll have no claim on us.”

But they just weren't prepared for how tricky Jesus could be. He saw right through their charade and saw into their hearts. He knew what shadows lurked in the darkened corners of their hearts, and answered back with a commandment that still reverberates with world changing power: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*” They sought to escape his claims. Instead, they were claimed even further by the grip of his gospel. They wanted to box him in. They wanted to discredit him so that the voice of their conscience would no longer call out to them that perhaps this rabble-rousing rabbi was on to something. They wanted him silent, but what they got in return spoke louder than anything they could have expected.

No longer were they called only to love God, but also to love their neighbors as themselves. Which is to say, if you want to love God, love your neighbor. If you want to meet God, meet God in the face of your neighbor. If you want to know the next right thing to do, simply look into the faces of those around you and love them with a kind of ferocity the world simply can't ignore. With one simple directional turn, Jesus silenced all those who would come at him with the sole purpose of ignoring everything he had to say. They had God staring them in their face, but they were still looking for God in the wrong direction. They weren't looking for God where God really was. They were only looking where they expected God to be. And if the Scriptures teach us anything, it's that God rarely does what we expect or desire.

It's easier now to misplace God, I think, to look for God in all the wrong places. The distractions, the frenetic pursuit of wealth and status, the crises at the heart of institutions of stability. All of these things conspire against us, and desire to draw us away from a pursuit of truth, justice, and a better tomorrow. But we have been washed by the waters of baptism, and will soon be fed by God's grace at this altar. We will leave here a renewed people, sent out to love God and our neighbors. When you find yourself confused, or you feel as if God is absent, simply turn and stare into the face of your neighbor, for suddenly you will realize you have been sitting next to God all along. Love God. Serve the world. And thereby, you will meet the God your heart so desires.