

Endless Knowing and the Mystery of God

Mark 9:2-8; Exodus 3:1-5,7,10,13-14

Sometimes one sentence or one thought can stimulate, or provoke, a sermon. So this week after I read this thought from Richard Rohr. “The Mystery of God”, he said, doesn’t mean that God is unknowable but that God is endlessly knowable.” That set my mind and heart spinning.

I

When I was growing up there was no mention of the Mystery of God. God was completely knowable, and we had the corner on the market of who God was. You might say that Christian denominations or churches love to say: “I know God better than you do!”

But at some point early in my life as a seminary student and pastor the importance of the Mystery of God became clear. It was a correction to the earlier notions of a God who was eminently and easily knowable. God was beyond our full knowing of God. An over-certainty about who God is and what God wants is a form of idolatry, a graven image of our minds. Too many preachers become “certainty-merchants”, hawking a God all too easy to understand.

Some people use the Mystery of God as an easy way out, an escape hatch when theological questions arise. They say, in pious tones, “O, God is a Mystery!”.

But what Rohr’s comment gave to me was a new and exciting understanding of the Mystery of God:

A God who is not unknowable but endlessly knowable.

Our spiritual quest to know God is an endless, life-long quest because knowledge of God is inexhaustible.

II

So I begin with this astounding thought: The God who loves us *wants to be known*, not for God’s own sake but for the sake of our relationship with God, and not only for our relationship, but for the sake of the world. God has forever been seeking to reveal God’s own self and God’s desires for the world. We sometimes call it God’s will. A beautiful New Testament word for God’s will is God’s “good pleasure.”

The Bible is the witness to God’s self-disclosure through word and action. The Torah, the Prophets, the Writings of the Old Testament, the coming of Jesus and the N.T. writings are all manifestations of God’s self-revelation. Creation itself is a revelation of God.

Again, God wants to be known not only for the sake of our relationship alone but for the sake of the world, the healing, justice and peace of the world. The prophet Isaiah dreamed God's dream of peace where "the earth would be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters that cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9)."

But the God who wants to be known is beyond our full knowing by our finite minds. We get into trouble and make trouble when we presume to know God fully.

Paul Tillich talked about the "God beyond God", the God beyond our religions and theologies about God. This is an important idea for me.

To say that God is endlessly knowable is to say that we can never capture who God is, never exhaust our knowing of God. Relationship with the God of the Bible is an invitation to endless knowing. It combines reverence and adventure.

III

So let's turn to the first of our texts for today, God's revealing of who God is and what God desires to Moses. God called Moses to a divine mission and gave to Moses the Divine Name.

Moses had fled Egypt after murdering an Egyptian over-lord who was beating a Hebrew slave. Now he was tending his father-in-law's sheep in what is

now the Sinai Peninsula. He passed a bush aflame and noticed something strange. The bush was aflame but not consumed by the flame. “Hmm, that’s curious!” Moses said, and came closer to investigate. As he drew close a Voice said, “Take off your shoes, for this is holy ground.”

Then God spoke from the burning bush and said, “I have seen the affliction of my people in Egypt and heard their cry. I will go down to deliver them from slavery.” This was a revelation of the Divine purpose. Then God said, I want you to go deliver my people. Moses objected for a while but then relented. He would go to Pharaoh.

He then asked God, “When I go and they ask the name of my God, what shall I say?” And God answered, Say “I AM WHO I AM.” That’s the most common translation. The Hebrew word as YHWH. We supply the vowels and pronounce it Yahweh.

But Jews will not say the Divine Name, so deep is their reverence for the name of God. They substitute the word Adonai, which means “Lord.” When they write the name God, they leave off the “o”. G_d. When they talk about God they use the Hebrew word *Hashem* which means The Name. We are talking about the spiritual quality of reverence here. At Myers Park Baptist on Sunday mornings there was a Buddhist meditation group. It was in the basement of the educational

building. It was always touching to me when I would walk by the closed door and I saw all the shoes outside the door. Reverence.

So let's slow down and take a look at the name itself. YHWH. First it is a verb. Not a noun that can too easily define God, but a verb. In one of my churches we sponsored a theological conference with the name: "God is A Verb." It is a form of the verb *to be*. Liturgical theologian Gail Ramshaw likes to translate it: "The Living One." I AM means that God is Being Itself.

Secondly there is an elusiveness about the name. It is not easily translated. Some speak of it as Breath itself. You breathe in then breath out: *Yah-weh*.

Toni Craven, Old Testament professor at Bright Divinity School, says that the elusive, untranslatable quality of the name means that God is saying: "My name is Yahweh. Follow me and you will learn what this means." What does I AM mean? It means I AM love, I AM justice, I AM mercy, I AM life, I AM peace. See, we can go on and on! God is endlessly knowable.

The third of the Ten Commandments is "Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord in vain." Part of the meaning is here, to use the name of God to back our own cause, tribe, nation, to back you own bigotries and desires—all forms of creating God in our image.

At the burning bush God revealed God's nature and will, that God wants all people free, and that God's name means a God of endless knowing.

IV

Now to the gospel text, what we call "the Transfiguration." God revealed God's self to the disciples in blinding light and dark cloud.

Jesus had taken his disciples up to a high mountain. Suddenly he was transfigured before them in blinding white brilliance. Then Moses and Elijah appeared and the three of them began to talk with one another, a Divine Summit Meeting, if there ever was.

Peter, per usual, rushed in where angels fear to tread and said, "Lord, let's build three booths, one for you one for Moses and one for Elijah!" The text says of his words: "For he did not know what he was saying!" True words there! Peter is like us all. When we experience God we want to build a shrine for it. We want to fix God there. But God cannot be captured in a shrine, church or temple. God's Presence is an "elusive presence"¹ God appears then moves on.

What happens next is crucial. A dark impenetrable cloud engulfed them, and they were afraid. God is both brilliant presence and thick cloud. The British

mystic called it “The Cloud of Unknowing.” True theology always holds two things at once in its hands, what we know and what we do not, cannot know. Some call one the “Positive Path” and the Other the “Negative Path”, one has to do with the God we can see and hear, picture and understand; the other on the God who is beyond our seeing and hearing, beyond our theologies and religions. These two paths together preserve the Mystery of God. The Transfiguration was both Light and Cloud, revelation on the mountain and “cloud of unknowing.”

Then out of the cloud a Voice came in the darkness so thick they could not see: “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.”

God was saying, “Do you want to know me? Look at him. Do you want to follow me? Listen to him.”

V

Now with our last turn, let’s turn to how the endless knowing of God applies to the realm of human relationships, to our endless knowing of one another. As human persons created in the divine image, we partake in the Mystery of God too. Relationships thrive in the endless knowing of the other.

Love is the path of the endless knowing of one another. When we presume to know another completely the relationship is dead. Marriages begin to die when we no longer desire to know one another more deeply. When we roll our

eyes at another and say “There he goes again, she goes again”, we may have stopped trying to know them more deeply.

A prominent American Buddhist teacher, Jack Kornfield, tells of the day years before when he entered the monastery to be a monk. The abbot gave him this instruction at the beginning: to bow to anyone who had been a monk before him there. The young monk said, “But that’s *everyone!*” (He already had a few monks in mind that he had met that he didn’t think deserved a bow.) The abbot answered “Yes, everyone.” Later he learned the wisdom of it.

We would do well to bow in our minds before everyone we know as an act of reverence for the divine mystery of who they are.

H. Richard Niebuhr in describing all true love writes about the “reverence of love”:

Love is reverence: it keeps its distance even as it draws near....it rejoices in the otherness of the other; it desires the beloved to be what [the beloved] is and does not seek to refashion [the beloved] into a replica of the self or to make the [other] a means to the self’s advancement. As reverence love is and seeks knowledge of the other... not for the sake of gaining power, but in rejoicing and in wonder. In all such love there is an element of that “holy fear” which is not a form of flight but rather the deep respect for the

otherness of the beloved and a profound unwillingness to violate [their] integrity.²

When Moses came near the burning bush God said, “Take off your shoes, for this is holy ground.” We do this as we draw near each other too. This is the beginning of reverence.

1. Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (N.Y.: Harper&Row,1978).

1. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (N.Y.: Harper&Row,1956),35.