

Sermon - Proper 17, Year B
9/1/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thomas Merton, the Cistercian monk and writer, is perhaps one of the most well-known spiritual teachers of the twentieth century. In a collection of writings called *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he recalls the extraordinary moment of a revelation from God. He was walking in Louisville, Kentucky, and in the center of the shopping district, at the corner of 4th and Walnut, he suddenly experienced what it is to be a human being in way he had never experienced before: He writes:

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world. . . . This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. . . . I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

“*We could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.*” I think we have all glimpsed this, even briefly – even if we might not be able to recall the last time. There are moments of grace shared between strangers all the time – moments that call our hearts out from under their own worries and show us that the rest of the world is also, genuinely, just trying to do its best. Any belief that we are “separate” from others is, as Merton says, an illusion.

God did not make the world to be a place of isolation and anger. Jesus did not become incarnate to walk among us, die upon the Cross, and walk freely from the grave in the Resurrection for only a handful of people who know the secret password. God did not create us to pretend to be holy or to worry about the stumblings of others. God created us in love, for freedom, and for walking around, shining like the sun.

In the Gospel today, Jesus is once again confronted by a group of authorities who are seeking to undermine him. The Pharisees have come, once again, to try to show that Jesus is royally missing the point. They hope to prove that he is a false teacher. He threatens their power - he threatens their illusion of holiness. The authorities scold him for permitting his disciples to get about their business without following the rules of ritual purity to the letter of the law.

In reality, it was quite common even for faithful Jewish people to not follow every single letter of the law. There were exceptions. People did certain things in public and other things at home. There were different interpretations of how the law should be used. Jesus and his disciples were not the only ones who could be accused of interpreting something differently. But Jesus was threatening in a frightening and powerful way. He was threatening to disrupt the order of the shopping district in Louisville at the corner of 4th and Walnut. He was eating with sinners, cavorting with foreigners, healing the poor, and blessing the women and the children. He was teaching the world to see as God sees: that any belief that we are somehow separate from one another is an illusion. We are not meant to pretend to be holy or to sacrifice our life upon the altar of good reputation. We belong to one another, and we are meant to be whole.

One of the ministries of my life that has surprised me most came from the day I agreed to lead an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in a women's prison. I wonder if you have ever had something like this happen to you – where every single part of you thinks, “how on *earth* am I

possibly going to do this?” but then the Holy Spirit sort of takes possession of you and you just know that you’re going to do it and whatever happens next is completely out of your hands.

The first morning I arrived, I had to go through the security area and get my information in order. I was told things would go better if I just showed up in unremarkable clothes, so there I was in brown pants and a gray shirt, and I had to wait awhile. While I was there, a very young Catholic priest arrived, and I don’t know what he thought when he saw me waiting in the processing area, but he greeted me with a look of sympathy. He came over to sit beside me, and he asked if he could pray with me. I said yes, and he began to pray about “repenting of my sins” “using my time to come closer to God” and my guts just about fell out of my body when it hit me: *this kid thinks I am going to prison!*

Every instinct within me wanted to immediately disabuse him of any assumption that *I* was there for institutional correction. How could he think that? Had he ever *been* to a women’s prison? Clearly this guy has no *idea* what he’s doing? How ridiculous! How *rude!*

But just as quickly as my sinful pride was rearing its head, thank God - thank GOD! - the Holy Spirit took possession of me again as I realized: **there is nothing different about me.** Any belief that we are somehow separate from one another is an illusion. I was the Pharisee - believing myself good and holy because that’s what I wanted people to see, but I am just the same as those women, as that priest, as the guard who took my ID, and as every person whose ever crossed the threshold of a prison praying desperately to use their time to come closer to God.

‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

Jesus is clear: it is not what comes from outside that can hurt us – no unclean food or drugs or alcohol or tattoos or scars – these aren't the things that hurt us. What hurts us is any belief that we are separate from one another. This illusion of separateness is what drives us to Jesus' litany of awful things: "fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

And so Jesus calls us to look at our own hearts – not as in a mirror as the letter of James remarks this morning – but as an exercise in faithfulness. Jesus takes our hands and grasps our shoulders and turns us to face the things within us that truly matter. We will probably find our worst sins there, but they can only be healed when we bring them out into the light. Do not worry about how you look or what other people think, but begin here, in your own heart, alongside the savior who sees everything and loves you.

Amen.