

Knowing God

John 1:10-18

In his tribute to his father, Leo Buscaglia, includes this testimony:

One place we could always be assured of hugs was on Papa's lap. It was a royal area where we could find security and peace to be found nowhere else....When I settled in, I could stay for hours. I dared not move for fear that I might cause Papa some discomfort and be asked to leave. At times he'd brush my hair with his hand or lean over and kiss my head. There, in Papa's lap, I was special, and things were always right. I always knew his lap would be there – mine, when I needed it.

Do you ever have that longing to curl up in a welcoming lap that feels safe and warm, a lap that is available whenever needed? There is such a “lap” accessible to us. It is the lap of God. Jesus came to show us that God's lap is welcoming, gracious, spacious, and nurturing. Jesus himself has curled near the lap of God, for John tells us he is the only Son who is close to the Father's heart. The bosom or chest area is the place of embrace. It is also the place where gifts are received and carried, or carried to be given away. To be in someone's chest or close to their heart means to be very near to them and cherished dearly.

The message of Christmas is that God draws near to us in Jesus so that we can be in relationship with God, so that we can crawl into the lap of God. The relationship God offers us is a covenant, a sacred commitment. From the earliest recordings of our human understanding of God, God has continually said to the people, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” In the history of the Hebrew people that covenant was frequently renewed, beginning with Abraham and continuing on through the patriarchs and the prophets. With Jesus God offered a new covenant with the people, sealed with the blood of Christ. This is a covenant of everlasting relationship, of forgiveness for times when we stray, and of unconditional love. God has “pitched a tent” among us and promises never to leave us. That's the gift of Christmas – Emmanuel, God with us always.

We may wonder, then, where God was December 26 when an earthquake and tsunami took the lives of thousands of people in Southeast Asia. I am reminded of the story of the prophet Elijah who was forced to flee for his life from someone who wanted to kill him. He was led into the wilderness. “There was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the

fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence” (I Kings 19:11-12). In the silence God reminded Elijah that he was not alone and that he had more work to do.

Last Sunday God was not in the earthquake that shook in the depths of the ocean. Nor was God in the tsunami that devastated lives and villages and cities. But God is there now weeping with the people in grief for their losses. God is there “pitching a tent” among the tents set up for the thousands who have been left homeless. God is there embodied in hundreds of relief workers who are arriving to offer assistance and a caring presence. God is with the people as they deal with horrific consequences of the forces of nature. God is there now seeking to offer the love and compassion we know in Jesus Christ.

God has always desired to be in relationship with us. That’s why God made a covenant, a sacred commitment, to be our God and offer us the holy invitation to be God’s people. Too often, however, we humans have given our hearts to other loyalties. We’ve made commitments that compete with our relationship with God. We’ve found our identity in other sources. We’ve separated ourselves from God, from the relationship God desires to have with us, and from the covenant to be God’s people.

Marcus Borg relates a story about a three-year-old girl. She was the firstborn and only child in her family, but now her mother was pregnant again, and the little girl was very excited about having a new brother or sister. Within a few hours of the parents bringing a new baby home from the hospital, the girl made a request: she wanted to be alone with her new brother in his room with the door shut. Her insistence about being alone with the baby with the door shut made her parents a bit uneasy, but then they remembered that they had installed an intercom system in anticipation of the baby’s arrival, so they realized they could let their daughter do this, and if they heard the slightest indication that anything strange was happening, they could be in the baby’s room in an instant.

So they let the little girl go into the baby’s room, shut the door, and raced to the intercom listening station. They heard their daughter’s footsteps moving across the baby’s room, imagined her standing over the baby’s crib, and then they heard her saying to her three-day-old brother, “Tell me about God—I’ve almost forgotten.”¹

The story suggests that we come from God, we are born of God, and that when we are very young we still remember this. But the process of growing up, of learning about this world, is a process of increasingly forgetting the one from whom we came and in whom we live. Early in our lives comes the birth of self-consciousness, of self-awareness, that is,

awareness of the distinction between self and world. This leads to the birth of a separated self, whose world revolves around itself. By the time we reach early adolescence, our sense of who we are is increasingly the product of culture. We internalize the culture's messages about appearance, achievement, and affluence. We wonder, Am I attractive enough? Am I cool? Am I good enough? A false self created by culture is developed. In other words, we live our lives from the outside in rather than from the inside out.

Jesus comes so that we might find our way out of estrangement and separation from God and back into relationship with God. The idea of knowing God is not an intellectual pursuit; to know God is to have personal fellowship with God. Faith is not a matter of the head; it is a matter of the heart. Jesus shows us how to die to the false self and to be born anew into a identity centered in Christ, in God. Jesus guides us to centering our lives in God, so that our lives might be transformed.² God wants us to fall in love with God and live from the inside out.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, encouraged Methodists to intentionally renew their covenant with God once a year. He selected New Year's Eve as a fitting time for covenant renewal. Given our propensity to New Year's Resolutions, it does seem appropriate that among the first resolutions we make is to renew our relationship with our God.

John Wesley adapted a prayer written by a Puritan preacher, Richard Alleine. Wesley's first reference to using the Covenant Prayer in a service of covenant renewal is in August 1755, nearly 250 years ago.³ Methodists have used it annually since that time for the purpose of recommitting their lives to God.

Here is a version of the Covenant Prayer:
I give myself completely to you, God.
Assign me to my place in your creation.
Let me suffer for you.
Give me the work you would have me do.
Give me many tasks,
Or have me step aside while you call others.
Put me forward or humble me.
Give me riches or let me live in poverty.
I freely give all that I am and all that I have to you.
And now, holy God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – you are mine and I am yours.
So be it.
May this covenant made on earth continue for all eternity. Amen.⁴

This is not a prayer to be taken lightly. It makes a commitment to a radical centering of our lives in God. It is a prayer asking for God to shape our identity and way in the world. We're going to pray the Covenant Prayer as our Prayer Dedicating our Gifts to God. As you pray this prayer, I invite you to renew your covenant with God, to commit your life anew to follow God's leading for your life in this new year.

Knowing God, loving God, making room for God at the center of our lives makes a difference in all our other relationships. As Jesus' life emanated with his relationship with God, so ours does as well.

Dorotheos of Gaza, a sixth-century teacher, once preached a sermon for the monks in his monastery who were grumbling that they were unable to love God properly because they had to put up with one another's ordinary, irritating presence. No, Dorotheos told them, they were wrong. He asked them to visualize the world as a great circle whose center is God, and upon whose circumference lie human lives. "Imagine now," he asked them, "that there are straight lines connecting from the outside of the circle all human lives to God at the center. Can't you see that there is no way to move toward God without drawing closer to other people, and no way to approach other people without coming near to God?"⁵

As we grow in love with God, we will grow in love for our neighbors and for ourselves. In this new year may we grow in love for the God who greatly desires to be in relationship with us. Amen.

¹ Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003), pp. 113-114.

² Ibid., pp 113-119.

³ Beasley-Topliff, *Surrendering to God* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2001), pp. 111-120.

⁴ *Disciple Bible Study* (Nashville: Graded Press).

⁵ Roberta C. Bondi, *Memories of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 201.

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