



“Listening Ears”

Matthew 18:21-35

Sermon Preached by the Reverend Thomas R. Stout

Sunday, September 4, 2011

Ah, Labor Day: the end of summer, the start of school, the beginning of football season. I have always loved this holiday. But this year, it is also the week after Hurricane Irene hit (at our house we lost power for 65 hours). Elsewhere in the Northeast, right now there are over 200,000 homes still without electric. This is also the week after a tornado struck in Sussex County; and it is the week after an earthquake (centered not far from my cousins’ homes outside of Richmond, VA) shocked all of us from North Carolina to New England. Then, of course, next Sunday is the 10th anniversary of 9/11. The effects of that tragedy - from airport security, to rising cancer rates among first responders, the continuation of the war in Afghanistan – are still with us as we approach the end of next week.

My heart and mind have been, and still are, all over the map. And I cannot help but wonder if some of you are in a similar place? So much to ponder, so much out of the ordinary; and yet, here you and I are, in this familiar house of prayer, doing the usual Sunday morning service in Ordinary Time. What does the community of faith do with the unusual, the frightening, the awesome, the awful? This is an old question: accounting for a God of love while life and existence is filled with uncertainty, constant change, and, sometimes, just plain evil. What does faith in God make of this right here where we all live?

The Lesson for this morning has seldom been used to answer such a question. But as I listened to Jesus words again, and especially in the context of

last week and next, I heard something both of comfort and of guidance in facing this issue.

Let me go back to my week that was for a moment. I have always been fascinated with storms, especially big summer ones, like Irene or Katrina. I can remember as a child, lying on the slope in our backyard, watching the clouds gather, darkly and inexorably. The wind would pick up, the leaves on the tree turned their backs outward, and even the branches created moans and whistling sounds. Awesome, I thought, truly awesome. When the lightning started piercing the skies, we knew it was time to get some place safe. I think that is when I began to be able to hold two contradictory thoughts in mind at the same time: awe and wonder.

“This is my Father’s world,” wrote Maltbie Babcock in his familiar hymn. “And to my listening ears, all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres.” My “listening ears” and “looking eyes” and pondering heart all were open this past week. The inconvenience of being without electricity was as shocking as it was maddening. I never realized how dependent I was on this one, ubiquitous harnessing of earth’s energy resources. Sure, I enjoyed the awesome natural power of the storm, but it was so darned inconvenient. For many it was, and still is, much more than that.

I notice two things in the realm of human life and faith in this past week. First, when your electricity is out, light and dark are more noticeable. You can only read for so long by candlelight or flashlight. And then, there are no distractions, like television or computers. Yes, there was battery powered radio. But when was the last time you or I used radio for anything important. So, Nancy and I went to bed when it was dark, and we got up when it was light. We were in rhythm with the rhythms of our world. Just like at the retreats we do at Holy Cross Monastery. “Ora et Labora”, pray and work, that was all the rhythm of earth would let us do last week. I started to like that....

And then, the lights came on across the street and all around our neighborhood, except for our side of the street. Neighbors on the other side of the street brought out extension cords crossed the street and gave us electricity enough to run a refrigerator, or a freezer, or even a television. Even those new to the

neighborhood took part. Then, when we could walk the dog, we stopped and talked with neighbors we hardly knew, as well as longtime friends. What I saw and felt was that we belonged for those three days to one another; and it was... well, it felt wonderful.

This is my Father's world, O let me ne'er forget

That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet.

For me this past week was an experience both with the presence of God and with the community of the human family. Granted it was not for very long, but, I noticed it. And I'll bet many of you did too.

The lesson from Matthew's Gospel is about such a life in community, with God, among the followers of Jesus. And what caught my eye in all that Jesus says in these verses is that: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." If we want to feel, to know, even to touch the living presence of God in our lives, it takes two or three of us being together. If you want to become more aware of God in your life, it is not just a solo task. It takes others. The early church fathers said the group Jesus was talking about was a mother, a father, a child, a family. Where we are, there is Jesus.

And indeed, why does Jesus tell his disciples in this lesson to be so persistent about restoring the one who is the "offender"? If we read this text closely, even when Jesus counsels letting go of the offender who will not listen, what does he say to do? Right! Let that person become as "a Gentile or a tax-collector to you." And how did Jesus relate to tax-collectors and others beyond the pale of first century religion? Right again! He ate with them, he visited their homes, he even asked them to follow him. Jin Kin, pastor of the Presbyterian Church of All Nations in Minneapolis puts it this way: "The church is an institution or a denomination where two, or three, or more people live together in mutual interdependence. ... This requires casting off the yoke of individualism ... and putting on a profound trust of, and commitment to, people different than ourselves."⁽¹⁾

To know the presence and providence of God, to use that in facing the challenges and changes of our times, it takes two or three of us with each other.

For then Jesus has promised he will be present. Hold on to that for the week to come. I think that will help us all remember and to move in a more healthy, humane way into what comes next.

Let me close with a prayer on just this same theme of finding the presence of God in each other. It is written by theologian John Philip Newell:

“Whichever way we turn, O God, there is your face:

in the light of the moon and pattern of the stars,
in the scarred mountain rifts and ancient groves,
in mighty seas and creatures of the deep.

“Whichever way we turn, O God, there is your face:

in the light of eyes we love,
in the salt of tears we have tasted,
in the weathered countenances east and west,
in the soft skin glow of the child everywhere.

“Whichever way we turn, O God, there is your face,

There is your face,
among us.”⁽²⁾

NOTES:

1. Jin S. Kin, **Feasting on the Word**, Year A, Vol. 4, page 49.
2. John Philip Newell, **Praying with the Earth**, page 31.