

## INCARNATIONS OF SPIRIT

(05/02/10)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 3:16-17  
John 20:19-22

*“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” (John 20:21)*

The gospel reading this morning is the disciples' recollection of their encounter with the risen Christ the evening of the day following his resurrection.

The disciples' encounter with the risen Christ is a comforting experience. They suddenly realize that Jesus is not dead. The Jesus whom they knew in his human form, the one who died on the cross, is present to them as the risen Christ. This Christ has no limitations and is constrained by no barriers. Though the doors of the house where they meet are closed and locked, Jesus miraculously appears and stands among them.

In addition to being comforted by this encounter, the disciples are given a mission. Jesus tells them, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” He tells them to go out into the world and minister in his name. He tells them to preach the gospel, teach people about the kingdom of God, heal the sick, and cast out demons. In the words of the beautiful anthem that our choir sang last week, Jesus tells them that they are to be his hands and that he will live in the world through them.

Jesus tells the disciples that even as God became incarnate in him, so he is now incarnate in them. Because they are not only his disciples but also his apostles, he lives both within them and through them. They are commissioned to be his human, earthly presence. The more deeply they ground themselves in his presence, in their relationship with him, the more fully their lives will show forth his presence in the world and the more empowered they will be to bring about the kingdom of God on earth.

In my sermons I try to help us understand God and ourselves more fully, to help us relate to God and ourselves on a deeper level. As I write the sermon I often think of one or two members of this congregation who would benefit from grasping the deeper meaning of a certain passage of scripture. I have to admit I am a little disappointed

when I step into the pulpit on Sunday morning only to find that the person or persons whom I had in mind are not present. I hope they will eventually read the printed version of the sermon and realize it is speaking to them.

Last week, as I wrote my sermon, I was thinking about several of us who have lost loved ones to death. The more I thought about it the more I realized how many of us have lost loved ones, and how practically everyone's life has been touched by loss.

The disciples lost the Jesus whom they knew. Jesus, as a particular and very special human incarnation of the eternal Christ, died on the cross. The disciples are in mourning. They feel confused and depressed.

Then, according to scripture, they suddenly feel his presence. They discover him in a new way, in a new form. They realize not only that he lives, and that he is present *to* them, he is also living *through* them. In essence, he is now incarnate in them. He continues his healing, reconciling work in the world through them.

In our Spiritual Study and Growth Group we have discussed how the act of letting go of our loved ones when it is no longer possible for them to remain in human form and, in fact, it might be quite painful for them to do so, may make it possible for us to discover them in a new and different way, not just in our memories but in life. This morning I would like to share the experience that led me to this conclusion, an experience I had approximately six years after my father's death.

My father and I were very close when I was a child and throughout most of my adult life. My father's core values, the values out of which he lived his life were his religious faith, his family, work, life-long learning, and athletics. As they say, like father, like son (at least in some cases). I am a Christian minister with a wonderful family, someone who loves his work and loves to work, a life-long learner who played baseball and lacrosse in college. You can see why we were so close and why we enjoyed each other's company.

My dad, in some ways, lived in a relatively small world. He never finished high school. Other than a stint in the Navy during WWII and the year our family lived in California, he did not travel. He never read the books or had many of the experiences I have had, experiences like living in Germany, studying in Switzerland, and traveling around Europe with my family. These were, however, experiences that he helped to make possible in many different ways.

My dad loved to have me tell him about what I experienced or learned. He saw parts of the world that he could not directly experience through my eyes. He wasn't exactly living his life vicariously through me. In his small world, perhaps because he was an introvert with a deep religious faith, he lived a rich and fulfilling life. He just liked to hear about what we were doing with our lives. When Darlene would tell him about a little child who had recently come to this country and who felt alienated and confused because she didn't know a word of English, my father would tear up. He had an amazing amount of empathy. It was like he was really there with Darlene as she reached out to that little child.

In 1999, as you know, my son Corey and I embarked upon a trekking pilgrimage through Nepal and Tibet. We trekked in an area of northwest Nepal that our Sherpa guide referred to as the foothills of the Himalayas. From the perspective of a sedentary middle-aged minister-psychologist who is not in great physical condition, any trail that takes you up over 18,000 feet should not be described as "a stroll through the foothills."

It was a difficult trek, especially since I was sick for most of it. But that isn't the point. The point is that I wished I could have shared this experience with my dad. I wished I could have told him what I experienced when I returned home.

As our trekking group walked along the mountain trail, little children from the villages would run to greet us. These children were poor. Their families eked out a meager existence growing barley and raising animals. You would think these children would ask us for money. Pocket change for us was a year's income to them, for they

had little opportunity to obtain the currency that would allow them to buy the things they couldn't make. You would think they would beg for money. But they didn't.

These little children, as they ran toward us, called out, "Got paper?" "Got pen?" What they wanted more than anything else was a pen or pencil and some paper on which they could write or draw. I was dumbfounded and overwhelmed with emotion. The most important thing in these children's lives was not food for their stomachs but the opportunity to learn. They wanted an education. The drive for creativity was stronger than any other drive. When we would stop, take the time to write out the English alphabet for them, and give them the pen and paper so they could practice on their own, they were thrilled. Their dirty little faces were absolutely beaming. We walked away realizing how much we take for granted.

After one of these encounters, as we continued along the trail I thought about how much I would have liked to share this experience with my dad. He would have loved to hear it. He would have cried, just as I would have cried in telling it. I wanted him to be able to see, to experience this through my eyes, through my experience. But I couldn't. He had died six years earlier.

Then all of a sudden I started to cry. I must have cried for two straight hours. I have never cried so much or so deeply in my life. At first I thought it was an expression of my grief because I had not cried at the time of my dad's death or even when I did his memorial service. I got choked up during the service, but I didn't cry.

All of a sudden I realized it wasn't grief I was feeling and expressing; it was joy. I realized my dad was actually seeing and experiencing the encounters with these little Nepalese children through me. I was functioning as his eyes after his death just as I had functioned as his eyes before his death. I realized he was actually on the trail with me, that he was within me, and that everything I saw and experienced was seen and experienced by him.

This is why I am not sad about my father's death. There are times when I think of him and miss him. I miss our conversations and his droll sense of humor. But I don't miss sharing my life experiences with him because I do it every day. I know he is living right now through me.

Now you may think this is nothing but a psychotic defense against the pain of grief and loss, the terrifying reality of death. You might be right, but you might not be. I don't have the feeling that I have all this pain stored up inside me and that this is a way of protecting myself against it. I am also not particularly afraid of death. I have a feeling that this is what is actually happening. I think this is what Jesus meant when he told his disciples that soon he would no longer be with them, but then he would once again be with them.

What we are talking about here is incarnation. I don't know where my dad is right now. I don't know where we go after we die or even if the word "where" makes any sense. I am pretty sure that my dad does not have a body, since his body was cremated. The particular form that I knew as my dad has faded away, but my dad is not dead. He lives on both in me and through me.

I wonder if this is what God's incarnation in Jesus was all about. I don't know where or in what form God is, or even if the words "where" and "form" make any sense. If God is spirit, as Jesus told us, then I have a hunch that God doesn't have a body. I believe creation is God's body. God sees, hears, feels, and experiences through us, through all sentient beings. This is why all sentient beings are holy, sparks of the divine, incarnations of the Spirit of God.

If this is true, and I think it is, then we are all incarnations of God. We are not only God's hands, as we heard in the beautiful anthem last week, the means through which God brings healing to the world, we are also God's eyes and ears. What we feel goes straight from our hearts to God. Think about it. This is why God became flesh in

Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus, God learned what it feels like to be a human being. He learned what it feels like to suffer. He also learned what it feels like to love.

If this is true, and I think it is, then we are all incarnations of God in the world of space and time, whether we are white or black, homosexual or heterosexual, animal or human. If we could see each other as incarnations of God we might be more troubled by all the suffering in the world. As Jesus told us, whatever happens to one of the least of these, whether it is suffering or the alleviation of suffering, happens to him and to God.

This is not only true of other people, it is also true of you. Think of yourself as an incarnation of God and see how this will change your feelings about yourself. Consider the possibility that God is living in our world of space and time through you. If God not only sees what you see but also feels whatever you feel, it might not be such a good idea to indulge in anger, in selfishness, in coldness of heart.

Finally, think of your loved one or loved ones who have passed away. You have lost them in one form, a human form, just as Mary and the disciples lost Jesus. If you open your eyes and your heart, however, you may not only discover them in new and different ways in the world, you may experience them living in the world through you, delighting in your experiences, continuing to share in your life.

If we approach the Sacrament of Holy Communion in an attitude of faith, we may experience our Lord Jesus Christ as present in these elements. Just as we take these elements into our bodies, where they are transformed into or become a part of us, so also we believe our Lord lives both in us and through us. This is what incarnation is all about, an experience of Spirit, of the “other side” in the realm of space and time, an experience of not only Jesus but also our loved ones. In that spirit, let us now partake.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
May 2, 2010*

## **PRAYER FOLLOWING THE SERMON**

Almighty God, be present to us in this worship service. Be present to us through the words of scripture and through sacred music. Be present to us in these elements of bread and wine.

Then open our eyes that we might see the ways you are present to us in our daily lives. Remind us that just as we can never be separated from you because of your great love for us, so also we can never be separated from those we love, either by distance or death. Amen.