

Sermon Preached March 1, 2015
Year B, Lent 2 – Mark 8:31-38
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

A gnome is in the garden busily destroying some bushes when a house cat appears.

"What are you?" asks the cat. "A gnome," comes the reply. "I steal food from humans, I kill their plants, I make annoying music at night to drive them crazy, and I love mischief. And what, may I ask, are you?" The cat replies, "Um, I guess I'm a gnome."

Today we are going to explore some issues of identity. Who do we believe ourselves to be? How does that impact how we approach the world?

Many of you may remember some of my earlier sermons in which I discussed the idea of non-dualism, and how that relates to the gospel message, particularly the parables of Jesus. Non-dualism is a challenging concept, particularly to those of us in the West. We are more comfortable with clear categories of black and white, good and bad, and we are less comfortable with unity. Non-dualism is a characteristic of Eastern religions such as Buddhism, but most of us don't consider that Christianity is also an Eastern religion. Over the past few years I have become increasingly convinced that most of what Jesus said and did is most easily understood through a non-dual lens. It is when we try to stuff Jesus and his message into our Western container and outlook, that the Christian message often comes out sounding illogical and incomprehensible. What do you mean Jesus is both 100% God and 100% man? What do you

mean love my enemies? What do you mean we have to lose our life to save it? These things make no sense! But with a non-dual perspective, they do.

In the gospel this morning, Jesus is roaming the countryside teaching and healing. The Apostle Peter has just recognized and proclaimed him as the Messiah. So Jesus begins to teach the disciples that as the Messiah he will suffer and die and after three days resurrect. Of course his disciples are horrified! Peter is feeling like teacher's pet with his earlier astute observation about Jesus' identity, so he kindly draws Jesus aside, as though not to shame him in front of the gang, and scolds him for saying such a thing. Crucifixion is bad! Jesus is good! Bad things don't happen to Messiahs. Jesus is obviously wrong. But Jesus in turn scolds Peter and points out that the way of God is not the way of humanity. With apologies to Leonard Nimoy's Mr. Spock, the truth of God isn't entirely logical. Perhaps the truth of God is not about saving your life, but losing it. Maybe rather than two diametrically opposed events, death and life are simply two sides of the same coin.

Non-dualism is not a belief, but a perspective. A particular way to look at reality, through the eyes of God. And with this new perspective we see old things in new ways. It is often described as "non-dual consciousness." As Jesus tells Peter, "you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things." He is pointing out the need to see with the mind of God and not the mind of humanity. The mind of God is non-dual. The cosmos is not divided. There is nothing that is separate from God. God is all in all, the great I AM. The writer and speaker Carl McColman explains it this way, "When you stand on the north pole, every direction is south. When you see the cosmos like God sees it, from God's point of view, everything you look at is

imperfect — so your task is to love it all, just like God loves it... When we embrace the “everything belongs” mind, in which we see all things with the eyes of God, loving with the heart of God, beholding God in all, we are empowered to bring Christ to all things: good and evil, happy and suffering, healthy and sick, virtuous and sinful.”¹ With the non-dual mind of love, we can affirm the good and transform the evil. “Nonduality does not erase differences; rather, it transcends them, by inviting us into that God-vantage-point.”²

When Jesus says we must deny ourselves and lose our life, is he saying we must become meek and humble? Give up everything we own? Live as doormats? Absolutely not! Rather, the non-dual observation of Jesus that we must lose our life to save it, is a challenge to our identity. Our old identity must die, so that a greater self may emerge. We are to deny the ego, the cult of self. It is the false self of control and ego-oriented dualistic thinking. The part of ourselves which believes we are in charge, or self-sufficient, the part that repudiates that we are children of God, or rejects that others are children of God. This dying to self is painful, but it allows us to open up whole new vistas of abundant life.

The theologian and mystic Richard Rohr speaks about the need for transformation in the Christian life in his book, Everything Belongs. He posits that we spend much of our time in the first half of life crafting our identities, whether it is identifying with our nationality, race, religion, job, whatever. But at some point, through the path of prayer and love, and the path of suffering, we come to a gradual awakening that those earlier identities are not who we really are.

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlmccolman/2012/07/nonduality-in-the-bible-and-us/#ixzz3T472ggi1>, 2/27/15

² *ibid.*

Rather, our true self is found in union with God, and it is expressed when we perceive with the unitive, non-dual, mind of Christ.

Yesterday I was watching a talk show discussing the British national known as Jihadi John, the ISIL Jihadist who has been beheading Westerners. The commentators were questioning how it was that a middle-class, educated man could be drawn to a group which performs such horrific actions. One observation was that those who are attracted to ISIL do so not because of who they are on the outside – their education, job, or family background – but who they are on the inside. They are lost and seeking a meaningful identity. However, rather than doing the hard work of suffering, loving, and praying, they take a short-cut, thinking it will give them the meaning they crave. It is the sort of thing which Richard Rohr notes when he writes, “It is much easier to belong to a group than it is to know that you belong to God.”³ So these Jihadists, instead of recognizing that by virtue of their birth as created and loved by God, they already have an identity as a child of God, they cling to this false self of control and judgment. They operate out of a dualistic view, setting their mind on human things: the dualistic Jihadist perspective which says that their version of Islam is the right one, and all else is evil and must be destroyed. And that by adopting this “correct” version of Islam, from their perspective, their righteous identity is assured. But of course they have missed the point of non-duality which is that all people are loved by God. Even if their actions aren’t condoned, we all receive our true identity, our true selves, from union with God, and the rest of God’s good creation.

³ Rohr, Richard, Everything Belongs, p. 22

We receive a similar message of identity in the Old Testament lesson this morning. In it Abram and Sarai are told by God that the Almighty is establishing a new relationship with them through a covenant, and that despite their advanced age, they will have a son. As a sign that they have denied their old self and are claiming a new life with the Almighty, God gives them new names to go with their new identities. They are now known as Abraham and Sarah, and a new life begins for them in this covenantal union with the Divine.

Recognizing our union with God, is the core of non-dual consciousness. The entire cosmos already participates in this union. When Jesus says that the “Kingdom of God is within you,” he is pointing out that the Kingdom already exists, we simply need to recognize and claim what is already there. When Jesus tells Peter to lose his life to save it, he means for Peter to let go of dualistic thinking, and his assumption that the crucifixion and death are bad. He wishes for Peter to lose his ego and desire for control. For in doing so Peter will begin to see as God sees, and observe a fundamental truth, that it is only through suffering and death that new life can be born. This is the lesson of the cross.

I will close with some further words from Richard Rohr. He writes, “I believe that we have no real access to who we really are except in God. Only when we rest in God can we find the safety, the spaciousness, and the scary freedom to be who we are, all that we are, more than we are, and less than we are. Only when we live and see through God can ‘everything belong.’”⁴

Amen.

⁴ Rohr, Richard, Everything Belongs, p. 26