

Second Sunday After Pentecost Year C
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian Burch
May 29, 2016

I received an email request from my college earlier this week. It said something like, "In this season of graduations, please celebrate all the new graduates and make a donation to your alma mater." Then the email had lots of pictures of fresh faced graduates, with their black mortar board hats walking through the campus to the stadium where they'll listen to some, probably, forgettable speech and receive their diplomas. I was tempted to be a little cynical about the alumni department tugging on my memories like that to make a quick buck, but I have to admit it was entirely successful. I was transported right back to that moment of college graduation when the world was one limitless opportunity and laid out before us.

On that summer day, however many years ago, after I had thrown my hat in the air and packed up my things, I went on a quest to find God. I took a greyhound bus from Minneapolis to a Christian retreat center nestled in the Cascade Mountains of Western Washington—accessible only by boat and with no phones or internet. I'd arranged to live at the retreat center for 14 weeks before the start of my seminary education, and I imagined that I would be thinking great thoughts about the nature of the human condition as it relates to the Divine. I had brought some of the great books of faith with me, and I endeavored to go to the chapel daily. By the end of my time there, I would have given my right hand for a People magazine. My time at the retreat center was fine—I learned a lot about developing and running volunteer programs—but I can't say that I found the definitive presence of God or anything like that.

That fall, I began my seminary education and thought, perhaps, THIS would be the place where I would find the essence, the spark of God. Surely, at the place where we form the future religious leaders of the world, the presence of God should be strongly felt. Well, again, the seminary was fine, but it was also kind of like college with a few more mandatory chapel services thrown in. Where was the spark of God that I was craving?

The next summer, I didn't have the luxury to go to a retreat center across the country. I was required to do a ministerial internship in a retirement community. I didn't choose the internship site because of any spiritual or divine importance...rather, it was the closest internship to my house and I didn't have a car at the time. And so, I bought a few nice shirts from Marshalls and buckled down to have a terrible summer.

I'm here to tell you that that twelve weeks of working with older adults around issues of faith, death, aging, memory, family—all the things that come to us at one time or another—that work changed my life, and I absolutely saw the face of God there. I found God in the cracks and crevices of this Chicago retirement community in a way I never could have imagined. So, I suppose what I'm trying to say is that I have a terrible track record for knowing where I will find God, but I have begun to trust that, in spite of my tendency to be wrong about the specifics, God shows up.

I was struck by this morning's Gospel account of Jesus healing the slave of a centurion. You might remember from all the sermons leading up to Easter that centurions are unlikely people for Jesus to be buddies with. Imagine the land of Israel deeply occupied by the Roman Empire, and you can possibly get a sense of how popular a centurion might be. Imagine the centurion, with his foreign accent, foreign language and foreign armor as the perfect example of the outsider—dangerous, inexplicable.

And yet, this soldier, this agent for a foreign power, ended up being a vehicle by which God made God's self known. In the story, we find God in this unlikely place, with these unlikely characters. Jesus is so taken with the faith of this strange soldier, that Jesus tells the disciples that the faith of the centurion is greater than the faith of most of Israel. If that's not a plot twist, I don't know what is.

And, the longer I am on the planet, the more I experience God to be like this—surprising, challenging. And perhaps you do as well.

I can say with confidence that we find God when we gather together and share a meal at this table. And I can say with confidence that we find God when we pour water into that font and invite someone new into the family of Christ.

But as to the rest? God is a little sneaky like that. We might encounter God in the person of a Centurion—a foreign soldier universally reviled. We might encounter God in the hallways of a retirement home. We might encounter God in a chance conversation in the bathroom at work. We might even encounter God in the words and deeds of those who look different, talk different, believe different, vote different....

The trick, I think, is not to become too complacent about the places where God may show up. And, maybe, the best approach is to have enough humility and curiosity to be open to the idea that your best ideas about the places where God is found could be mistaken. Or at the very least, could use a little tweaking.

I've already told you that I don't have a very good radar for tracking the places God will show up. But the promise that I can share with you this morning is that God will. It may be unexpected. It may look a little differently than you had imagined. It may even be at a time or a place that you don't exactly want. But God will show up. We worship a God who is, above all things, faithful to us.

I'll give you a fair warning, though. It has been my experience that, when God shows up—even in the unlikeliest of places—we cannot help but be changed. The world when God is present simply looks different. The poor and neglected aren't so easily ignored any more. They are the children of God. The lonely and isolated aren't someone else's problem. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. And when God shows up, Christians are compelled to respond with love, with faith, with bravery.

So, the promise is true. God shows up in unlikely places. And we, God's beloved people, cannot be the same any more. So go. Look for God. And the share the Good News of what you have seen. Amen.