



May 14, 2006

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Sue Verboom

Fifth SUNDAY OF EASTER

1 John 4:7-21

“I’d be glad to love God if only I could find Him”

“Agnostic”. Funny sounding word. The dictionary defines it this way: *one who thinks it is impossible to know whether God exists*. It’s not the same meaning as “atheist”. An atheist believes God does not exist. Atheists make the same leap of faith believers make, just in the opposite direction.

Many people experience an agnostic time in their lives. For some, it may persist throughout life. For others, it’s a stopping place along their journey towards atheism or belief in God. I have one dear, remarkably honest clergy friend who maintains, jokingly, that she’s an agnostic every morning until after her first cup of coffee. Some people experience a time of agnosticism after a terrible tragedy- death of a loved one, a crippling accident or illness. It can be hard to maintain faith in a God of love when we are suffering.

I went through an agnostic period in my early adult years, writing in a journal, “I don’t see how anyone can prove the existence of God one way or the other. I can’t even seem to get excited about the debate.” Every Sunday when I don my robe and stole and venture up this center aisle, I think how God must have a great sense of humor.

But, it CAN be a complicated journey. There are likely some for whom the existence of a loving God is unshakably real throughout their lives. May these folks cherish that blessing and thank God for it every day! But for others, it’s not so simple. Once a person takes the leap of faith to believe God exists, there are more leaps to take. We are called to believe God not only EXISTS, but LOVES US. We are called to believe God takes an ACTIVE PART in our every day. We are called to believe God longs to COMMUNICATE with us. We are called to believe God breathes messages of love into our hearts EVERY SECOND. We are called to LOVE GOD.

When I was confirmed at the age of eleven, this was a puzzle to me. How can you love God? God was invisible. God was everywhere, but I couldn't really see or touch God, could I? How on earth could I love God? It was like trying to love air. (That's not a bad analogy really--- without air I'd be dead in seconds, but do I ever feel gratitude, appreciation or LOVE for air??? Basically- never!) I found myself thinking, "I'd be glad to love God, if only I could find Him."

A story:

A young man went hiking in Rocky Mountain National Park, in Colorado. He was with a friend from his high school years. As they passed under fragrant pines, he talked about his dissatisfaction with his job. As they rested by a crystal, icy, roaring mountain stream, cooling their feet in the water, he poured out his sense of aimlessness in life. As they came to the top of a crest and stood drinking in the panoramic vista before them, he anguished over his growing conviction that there is no ultimate meaning to existence.

Laying a sympathetic hand on the shoulder of his friend, his companion said, "It sounds like you're going through a really tough time. Have you ever thought God might be able to help you with any of these struggles?" The young man thought a while, then stood up and stretched. "I just can't seem to find God. I'd be glad to look there for some help, if only I could find him." He breathed in a great breath of pure mountain air, and turned to make his descent.

As a child, I slept in a bedroom with a low window right by my bed. It was easy to open the screen and slip out into the yard. When I was ten, eleven, and part of a Confirmation class, I would often climb out the window on warm Nebraska nights. I'd feel myself enveloped by the black velvet of the humid air. I'd lie on the ground, gaze at the stars, and pray the Lord's Prayer. I told no one about my actions, not even my pastor, when I found myself puzzled in class, wondering how I could ever love God—wondering how I could find Him. No one yet had helped me understand I already knew ONE way to find and love God: in nature.

I think most people have met God in nature. Not everyone names their experience the same way, but I believe these are all encounters with the divine. We need to claim these experiences for what they are. God IS not nature or the universe- that's a belief called "pantheism". But God is IN nature and the universe. Next time you think, "I'd be glad to love God, if only I could find Him," take a walk outside.

Another story:

A man was strolling through the park with his wife and children. His wife was telling him about her excitement in the new church she was attending. "I really think you'd like it, Sam," she said. "The people are warm and sincere; they are really trying to love God and their neighbors." Sam pondered a while. The four year old suddenly stumbled, fell and skinned a knee. Sam held her close, dried her tears, put her on his

shoulders, and soon had her laughing at his Donald Duck routines. In a bit, he turned to his wife. "I don't know what I think about that God stuff. I don't know who God is, where God is. I try to love my neighbor, but I don't know anything about loving God." Putting an arm around his wife's shoulders, he pulled her close and kissed her. "But I love YOU more than words can say, and I'm behind you all the way in your church activities. If they are important to you, they are important to me."

1 John 4:12: *No one has ever seen God; but if we love each other, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.* Verse 16: *Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. Sam is, in Jesus' words, "Not far from the kingdom of heaven."* Our Scripture from John's first letter teaches us that loving others IS loving God.

God has such a wonderful way of teaching us these truths. Bishop Ben Oliphant of the United Methodist Church told of an incident when he was a pastor. A man Ben knew quite well arranged to be baptized and join the church one Sunday. What Ben did not know was that the man's son was going to come with him to the altar to also be baptized. Not knowing the young man's name, Ben leaned over and whispered, "The name of the son?" The man looked up and said, "What, Ben?" "The son, the son," Ben repeated, "what's his name?" The man looked up and said, "Jesus."

In every human face we see the face of Jesus. That is how we can love God. We love Christ in every person.

The author of the New Testament letter we read from today knew that Christian communities need encouragement in loving each other. Remarks further along in 1 John show he knew Christian groups can be rich soil for rancor, resentment, bitterness, and division. Christians can make the dubious claim to be living in the love of God while manifesting active ill-will towards each other. This can, and does happen in every church. United Methodist Churches present a greater challenge, perhaps, that some others--- since our tradition allows wide diversity in interpretations, understandings and perspectives about all sorts of issues. Yet we come together to worship and praise God. With the Holy Spirit's help, we struggle to love God and each other with the love Christ pours into our hearts.

It's interesting. People do wrestle with the existence of God. We all know we can't come up with "proofs" for God's existence. But if we ask the questions, "Do you believe there is such a thing as love?" most people can answer "Yes." But how can we prove love exists? We can't taste it, see it, touch it. But we do FEEL it, don't we? We experience it.

I invite you to find God today. Find God in nature. Find God in love. God is there- I promise you. CLAIM that what you've experienced, what you have felt has a name: GOD, CHRIST, the DIVINE.

Today, Mother's Day, is a day we celebrate loving relationships in our lives- relationships that have blessed us- with mothers, aunts, grandmothers, sisters, and with those who may not be blood relatives, but are definitely mothers of our HEARTS. We don't spell it out—It is not included in the verses of Mother's Day cards, but the truth is that all those "mothering"- type people who have loved us HAVE BEEN AGENTS OF GOD. In them and through them, GOD loves us. And in our response of love back to them, we are loving God.

God gives us love, that we might love. God is found where lives are lived in love.

In closing, I have one more story to share. It's a story about God giving and receiving love. Mary Ann Bird wrote a true story of her own life called The Whisper Test- these words are her words:

I grew up knowing I was different and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I must look to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech.

When schoolmates would ask, "What happened to your lip?" I'd tell them I'd fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me.

There was, however, a teacher in the second grade that we all adored- Mrs. Leonard by name. She was short, round, happy- a sparkling lady. Annually, we would have a hearing test. I was virtually deaf in one of my ears; but when I had taken the test in past years, I discovered that if I did not press my hand as tightly upon my ears as I was instructed to do, I could pass the test. Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something and we would have to repeat it back.... Things like, "The sky is blue," or "Do you have new shoes?" I waited for those words which God must have put into her mouth, those seven words which changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper, "I wish you were my little girl."

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. And guess what? We can't claim we can't find God. We love God as we love our brothers and sisters on this earth. Amen.