

Epiphany 7, Year C
Church of the Ascension, February 20, 2020
The Rev. Meghan Murphy-Gill, Curate

“Perhaps it is a gross presumption to try to imagine *a God’s eye view of things*, but I can only think these encounters, every one unique, must be extraordinarily beautiful.”

Marilynne Robinson, the great spiritual writer and novelist, offered this reflection some 7 years ago during a presentation on theological imagination and secularization at the Candler School of Theology. It was a reflection that pondered how the religious could see God’s presence even in the increasingly secularization of modern society.

I’ve been turning her phrase, “a God’s eye view of things,” over and over in my head all week, and wondering how God might see things as right now.

Teacher friends have shared with me alarming stories of “demonstrations” against masks at their schools – rarely by students, usually by adults, only some of whom are parents of the schools’ students. One friend told me how the demonstrators banged violently on the windows of the classrooms, frightening students to the point they feared for their own safety and had to leave the school.

And there have been other friends who are so frustrated with “anti-maskers” and “anti-vaxxers” that their choice words for them make me wonder if their sense of the common good could even include those who they rail against – though I, too, feel their frustration, as I spent the early months of the pandemic in a hospital, standing socially distant from grieving families as we watched their loved ones die through a window of a hospital room door.

Here we are, in yet another period of rapid change and resulting anxieties in the pandemic. Perhaps it is, as Robinson says, “a gross presumption” to even try to imagine how God might see things. And still I can’t help but wonder, how might we respond to one another, were we to even begin to try and take a *God’s eye view* of each other.

Could we encounter one another and see each other as unique and extraordinarily beautiful, in spite of our rage? Could we find common ground in our weariness? Our sadness? Our fear?

It seems to me that it is a “God’s eye view” that Jesus instructs us to take today in one of the most challenging passages of the Gospel: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

I cannot imagine that anything other than a God’s eye view would allow me to offer the shirt off my back to someone who has taken my coat. My own view of things right now is rather abysmal – Russian troops positioned to invade Ukraine, inflation making basic necessities that are already challenging to get even more out of reach for those experiencing poverty, yet another mass shooting in America early this morning in Portland. What does God see? What is God’s view of Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky? Of armed gunmen and their victims? Of profiteers and the poor? Are they encounters unique and extraordinarily beautiful? Like I said, today’s Gospel is challenging.

Scripture scholars will point out that Jesus presents a perspective that starkly contrasts to the prevailing notion of justice which calls for an eye for an eye — a code not so ancient after all if we just look at the homepage of the New York Times. That more primal sense of justice you can most often see play out in children. “He hit me first!” says the little girl whose parents’ are called for giving her classmate a black eye. Usually, it’s more complicated than that. Feelings get hurt, power is exerted. Fear sets in.

Were we to take a God’s eye view well before encounters that seem to demand our immediate, forceful, fearful response, how might these encounters be transformed?

Were we to take a God’s eye view every time we walk down the street, go into the grocery store, sit down to dinner with our most annoying in-laws, would we be transformed?

I recall when in the first months after my son’s birth, when I would go on walks in the neighborhood and see homeless men, peddlers, drunks, the mentally ill, that my heart ached for the babies these men had once been. “They had mothers, too,” I thought, looking down at my own pink cheeked baby, full of promise and possibility, snug in his stroller.

Those early months of motherhood offered me a glimpse into what God might see. But it is not a perspective taken lightly. When you truly begin to see others as fellow humans, when you see them even slightly as God sees them, that is with love, prepare to have your heart shot through with the pangs of yearning for something better for them. Prepare to have your heart shot through with the pain of knowing that you alone can’t give that something better.

To take a God’s eye view, despite that it sounds like a bird’s eye view, only from further away, is not and indeed should not, be from a lofty place on high. To attempt this perspective requires the opposite. To attempt this view is to be intimately present. To stay radically attuned to others’ belovedness.

Could you begin by taking a God’s eye view of yourself? How challenging it is to be intimately present to ourselves. To see ourselves as unique and extraordinarily beautiful.

Often at the heart of our conflicts, from the personal to the political, is not just our lack of willingness to see one another as God sees others. At the heart of our conflicts is often an inability to take a “God’s eye view” of our own selves.

And so I think it’s important to hear the words of Jesus not just as a reminder of how we can do better, but as a reminder of how God *already* sees us.

If you are your own enemy, and you cannot help but undermine yourself in all that you do, remember that God loves you. If you hate yourself, every time you look in the mirror, remember that God wants goodness in your life. If you curse yourself and the mistakes you’ve made, remember that you are blessed by God. If you abuse yourself, emotionally, physically, spiritually, remember that God is already intimately present to you and you can open yourself to that presence through prayer.

You are a child of God, full of promise and possibility. Even if it is too gross a presumption for you to take a “God’s eye view” of yourself right now, remember that God encounters you—every one of you—as unique, extraordinarily beautiful, and *beloved*.