

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

October 13, 2018
Community Prayer Service

Mark 10:17-27

Opening Poem
Rainer Maria Rilke

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.

Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

God speaks to us as he makes us.

Those are some of the most impactful words I have ever heard. When I hear them, I hear that God wants to know me. Not only does God want to know me but God wants to speak to me. And not only does God want to speak to me but God wants to work with me. And if God wants to know me and speak to me and work with me, God has to somehow, somehow be right here next to me.

But how in the world do we even begin to comprehend such a close personal relationship? Can we allow ourselves to imagine God whispering in our ear as he talks to us, to you? That's the image that comes to my mind. God gently, and quietly saying something only I can hear.

God...sitting that close, that near that I can touch his robes and hear his breath as he speaks softly to me.

I grew up hearing phrases like "having a personal relationship with God." But when I heard that growing up I heard it in the context that a personal relationship with God was built on a requirement. A requirement that I first had to make a statement of belief. That for God to walk with me I had to first decide to accept Jesus into my heart and that would begin my personal journey with Christ. The message was that a true and meaningful relationship with God came because of my flawed and fragile ability to believe a certain creed, make a specific profession of faith and to follow. Maybe you were taught that too.

I have to be honest – that teaching troubled me deeply.

Because what if I didn't know how to believe? Was I left out of God's love? I knew lots of folks who didn't believe or who hadn't heard much about the bible. What about them? And, what if I wasn't good enough? What if I had sinned? Would God still speak to me? What if I couldn't say those magical words – Jesus come into my heart. I want you as my Lord and Savior. Would God work with me only then?

I believed that kind of thinking for a very long time. I believed it was up to me to begin that personal relationship. Yet, over the years, I found that kind of belief system was often fear based – the fear of being left out and left behind. It made you want to say whatever was required to get that personal relationship because the alternative, of not professing a certain kind of faith - wasn't too pretty.

And then, I went through a radical and necessary shift in my theology. The more I thought about it and studied the nature of God's love, the more convinced I became that God didn't expect us to be the initial catalyst in this personal relationship. We didn't have to make the first move.

And that understanding changes everything.

I want you to notice something so important in our reading this evening from Mark. When Jesus talks to the rich man, he doesn't first tell the man to follow him. The first thing we learn is that Jesus simply loves him. Jesus makes the first move. The desire for a relationship comes next. Jesus didn't wait on the rich man to get it right or to say the right words or to make a specific profession of faith – in fact, the rich man had a long way to go, a lot to learn. And Jesus was right there to guide him, to help him, to make him as the poem goes.

That's the whisper I imagine. That's the Good News...that God is speaking to us and making us even when we aren't quite sure how to follow or even what we believe. Jesus reminds us that it's impossible for us to get it right on our own...to make that first step. But when we begin to listen to God, when we open to the possibility of our faith, all things are possible. By loving us first, God provides the path to follow.

God says, give me your hand.

I want you to imagine those words being said to you and I want you to imagine what it would be like to reach out and take God's hand. When things seem impossible. When the world has fallen in around you. When you have lost hope. When you don't know if you can even believe. Just reach out.

Maybe you don't believe in God's healing mercy just yet. Maybe you have a hard time trusting that God hears your prayers and knows your pain. Maybe you have felt like you have sinned too much or fallen too far away from faith.

God just wants you to come as you are. God already loves you. God is already walking with you and God is ready to take your hand. That's the real personal relationship and it's already there for each of us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.