

“One with God”
May 8, 2022
Scripture: John 10:22-30

About 10 years ago, John Philip Newell, a scholar and pastor, and former Warden of the Iona Abbey in Scotland, wrote a little book titled *A New Harmony*. That title's a play on words. He spends much of the book talking about the history and artwork of a little town near where I grew up called New Harmony, Indiana. It was established originally as a utopian community by the Welch industrialist and social reformer Robert Owen in 1825. As a social experiment it failed in about two years, but the town remains and its historic district has kept many of the original buildings. Newell wrote his book while staying there some years ago and uses some of the artwork in the town as entry points to a deeper understanding of our relationship to God.

For institutions like the church today or the religious establishment of Jerusalem in Jesus' day, it's helpful to keep God at arm's length, to think of God as outside and unlike anything around us. In the words of the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth, God is “wholly other.” By emphasizing that we're instilled with a sense of awe before the majesty of God. That profound “otherness” shapes our expectations and assumptions about how God will encounter us and what God will do for us. Among the religious faithful of Jesus' day those assumptions were expressed through a messianic expectation that God would overturn the Roman occupiers of Judea and drive them out through a leader in the model of King David.

When we meet Jesus in this story we find him in the temple during Hanukkah. That's not by accident. Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the temple after it was defiled by the Greek king Antiochus IV Epiphanes who was driven out of Judea by the Jewish Maccabees in the 2nd century BCE. There were many around Jesus who believed the Roman occupiers were also guilty of defiling the temple and Jewish life in general, so you can imagine how during Hanukkah their expectations would be heightened. “How long will you keep us in suspense,” they ask. “If you're the Messiah tell us plainly.” They want to know because they want to be there when the Romans are trounced.

When you think of God as remote and wholly other, it's easy to imagine God swooping in and wiping out your enemies. That's the way many of us educated in western theology were taught to think about God. It's how John Philip Newell was trained to think. In his book he describes a trip to India he took with his wife and daughter as his daughter was preparing to enroll in an academy for dance in Bangalore. One day he and his daughter were sitting in a botanical garden and were approached by an older Indian gentleman who struck up a conversation with them. The man was a retired banker but was steeped in Hindu spirituality. He asked John Philip, “Who are you?” He was searching for something more than just his name or occupation. John Philip knew that and eventually answered, “I come from the same One you come from.” That answer delighted the older man and they spent some time comparing their understandings of the Divine Presence. At the end of their conversation, the older man had to leave, and he said to John Philip, “I must be going now, but I have one final thing to say to you. You are God. And until you realize you are God, you will not be wise, you will not be happy, and you will not be free. Namaste.”

For someone who has spent their life imagining God “out there,” beyond us, beyond space and time, to hear that—you are God—was shocking. It left a deep impression on Newell and sent his thinking in new directions. The people around Jesus were also shocked when he told them, “The Father and I are one.” Even today in commentaries writers are quick to point out that what Jesus “really meant” was that he and God share the same purpose or are “of one mind.” But that’s not what he says, and it’s not how the people hearing it understood it. In the very next verse we’re told “they took up stones again to stone him.”

Jesus is offering a new understanding of God and how God relates to humanity. He’s inviting those around him to experience God intimately, within themselves, rather than out somewhere beyond them. By keeping God at arm’s length, separate from us, we put ourselves in a transactional relationship to God. Our actions are calculated to appease God and avoid punishment, motivated by fear. Jesus refuses to live in fear. He offers his followers a path to whole and lasting life, open and free, and not under the constant threat of death.

When we hear Jesus’ voice, it’s the voice of God within us calling us to a deeper relationship, a deeper intimacy, so that we can experience what a later writer named John means when he says, “God is love. And those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” As an institution the Church has resisted that. It’s much easier to maintain control through the threat of punishment from God than to risk losing control by promoting intimacy with God. We’ve always been more comfortable with judgment than with compassion. That’s why the people speaking with Jesus aren’t his sheep. They can’t follow when he calls because they live so deeply in the shadow of death.

When Jesus says, “I and the Father are one,” he’s opening to us a doorway to become one with God. Just like that man John Philip Newell met in the garden at Bangalore, Jesus invites us on to a path that can lead us to be wise, happy and free. Jesus understood that the greatest impediments to those qualities don’t lie somewhere outside of us, they lie within us, in our resistance to God’s presence within.

Today in the meal we share, the bread and wine of God’s bounty and God’s love, you are invited to take a step toward a deeper intimacy with God. You’re invited in this meal to be in communion with God, “co-union,” to be one with God. There are many layers of meaning in this meal, as you know. We often get stuck on the sacrificial meaning of it and don’t let ourselves experience the deep intimacy it represents. Jesus’ body and blood become one with us in this meal and we become one with God.

You may find that shocking. You may think it’s too romantic or too superficial. It may even make you a little angry to imagine it. There is something in us that resists. Perhaps you don’t feel worthy of that close a relationship with God. Perhaps you fear that if you accept it for yourself, you’ll be bound to accept that others, even people whom you don’t approve of, are also invited. You see, we don’t get to choose who are Jesus’ sheep. Any who hear his voice and follow are among them. Any who recognize the Divine Presence within themselves and others are Jesus’ sheep. God is relentlessly, embarrassingly indiscriminate. That can be hard to accept.

But I hope you'll try. I hope you'll come to this table in the awareness of God's deep love for you; the awareness that you are God because God is love. Jesus' voice calls you to listen and to follow; calls you to be one with God.

Amen