

“Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.”

In Robert Frost's well-known poem “Mending Wall” the poet is concerned with the walls we humans build, and with the impulse we have to separate and isolate. While I certainly share that concern I have always been drawn to this poem by a different aspect: the first three words: “Something there is...” That “something” that sends the frozen ground swell to spoil the human wall is somehow “other,” beyond human reason or imagination, but very real. The poet points beyond the known causes (hunters whose horses and dogs reek havoc with stone walls) and fanciful causes (he even discounts the possibility of “elves”) and simply leaves us with wondering what that “something” might be that wants to see all walls down.

I suppose I just appreciate how Frost takes a thumbnail to the taped-down edges of our “knowing,” leaving the mystery of transcendent possibility (that “something there is”) flapping in the breeze. In our reading from Acts Paul does likewise, sort of. Paul has been in Athens, and has been quite disturbed by the great number of idols he sees in that city. In arguing about this the Greek people are fascinated to hear what he has to say, and they ask Paul to speak in the Areopagus. Now we have to understand that the Areopagus – named after Ares, the Greek god of war – was the center of intellectual discourse in Athens, and therefore the Greek world. In the Areopagus they held political debates, pronounced judgments, argued philosophy, and especially enjoyed new ideas. This was to be a very daunting venue for Paul to preach the gospel. And his approach is rather ingenious.

Paul addresses this formidable audience by first acknowledging the obvious – they are very religious folks. They have idols on every street corner and in every home. Not only this but as is typical of pagan cultures their pantheon of gods covers every base possible – a plethora of gods of nature, politics, emotions, fertility, commerce, art, ... you name it they had it! Every aspect of the known and the supernatural world was covered by a deity to which they could pray. These are the known gods, controlling the known world. Through these gods the Greeks could have a sense of control over their own lives. Paul takes a thumbnail to the edge of their known world, and he points out the Athenian version of “Something there is...” He brings to their attention that there is an “altar to an unknown god.” The existence of such an altar is an acknowledgement that there is a god beyond all of this religious expression and idolatry on the ground. And Paul takes this opening to tell them that this transcendent god beyond knowing is none other than YHWH, the one and only God, the maker of all things in all places. As Paul tells the Athenians about the God of Israel who through Jesus Christ has become the God for all humankind, we may get the sense that Paul is just taping down that edge of human knowing with a Christian adhesive. But actually Paul's words generate more questions than they answer. So this God is really the one and only God, the maker of all things? How can this be? “In him we live and move and have our being?” How does that happen when there is only one transcendent God? And what is this about a God who becomes incarnate and dies and is resurrected, giving everlasting life to all? Paul really peels open the edge of knowing – an edge that two thousand years of doctrine and duct tape still cannot seem to hold down. Paul plants a seed of “Something there is...” that is irresistible. They follow him by droves.

Ours is a God who is fully revealed to us and yet is in many ways beyond our comprehension. What are we to make of this God who longs to be known (otherwise, why the law, the prophets, the incarnation?) and yet still lies beyond our full understanding? Perhaps we

might look at the line Paul quotes from the Greek Stoic philosophers of his time, This God “in whom we live and move and have our being.” This describes well a particular line of thinking in theology called panentheism. Literally panentheism means “everything is in God.” We mustn’t confuse panentheism with pantheism, which means literally, “everything is God.” In the theology of pantheism every blade of grass, every creature is God. In panentheism creatures are creatures, and quite distinct from the creator. The creatures – well in fact all of creation from the tiniest speck of dust to the stars and galaxies and farthest imaginable reaches of our universe – exist WITHIN the creator, our God. This is an old theology but perhaps most recently and best articulated by the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann. To understand our God in terms of panentheism is understand that we are never without our God, that God’s presence is a constant in our existence. And yet God is also beyond us, so much larger than creation can contain. The Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel captures this understanding well when he states, “God will always frustrate our attempts to grasp his nature fully simply because of the divide between creator and creature. God will always be fully with us, and yet beyond us, togetherness wrapped in holy otherness.”

Does this mean we are to stop reaching, to stop using the incredible gift of our intellects to grasp and grapple with who God is, who Jesus Christ is, what it means to be heirs of everlasting life? By no means! We do NOT check our brains at the door. We wrestle, and question, and discuss, and share experiences. This is why lifelong Christian education is so important. It is the responsibility of the leaders of this church to provide stimulating and provocative Christian Education – not only for children and youth but for adults as well, and it is the responsibility of the members of this church to participate. In wrestling with the questions we don’t necessarily get answers; we get God. I have found that in my spiritual journey I have far fewer absolutes now than I did, say, ten years ago. But I have found that in letting go of my need for taped-down doctrine I am far freer to explore the blur where knowable and unknowable meet, where the kingdoms of earth and heaven bleed into one. I believe this is why Jesus taught in parables rather than simply giving straightforward doctrine about the Kingdom of God. Somehow we are to embrace the “something there is...”, embrace the God who is ceaselessly with us and yet beyond us. We are to embrace the blur with the honed thumbnails of our minds.

I’ll close with a beautiful image for this by the Pulitzer Prize winning poet Lisel Mueller. Mueller describes an imaginary encounter between the painter Claude Monet and an eye surgeon. It turns out that the French impressionist Monet suffered from cataracts for much of his later life, making him almost completely blind by the time he was 80. The surgeon desires to return Monet’s vision to “normal,” a world of sharp crisp lines. The poem is called “Monet Refuses the Operation.”

“Doctor, you say there are no halos
around the streetlights in Paris
and what I see is an aberration
caused by old age, an affliction.
I tell you it has taken me all my life
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
to soften and blur and finally banish
the edges you regret I don’t see,
to learn that the line I called the horizon
does not exist and sky and water,
so long apart, are the same state of being.”

The poem goes on much longer, but Mueller concludes:

“Our weighted shapes, these verticals,
burn to mix with air
and change our bones, skin, clothes
to gas. Doctor,
if only you could see
how heaven pulls earth into its arms
and how infinitely the heart expands
to claim the world, blue vapor without end.”

We are called to embrace the blur of the Kingdoms of earth and of heaven, knowing that in that blur we will find our God. We are called to wrestle with the questions. Friends, we too are called to refuse the operation.

Healing

- I. The two women who attended the Wednesday healing service at Goodwin House.
 - One with severe and crippling arthritis, in severe chronic pain: “This is the most meaningful experience in my life. I never miss it.”
 - The other, with severe pain in her knees and back: “I don’t know why I waste my time. I don’t seem to be getting any better.”
- II. What are our bodies for?
 - The view of the body as an entity unto itself, separable from the mind and spirit, is a product of Greek thought and philosophy, and is alien to the understandings of Jews and to Jesus. Whereas the Greeks saw the body as separate from the soul, the Jews and early Christians understood that the body, mind, and spirit are intimately bound together. It was inconceivable to them to speak of healing of the body only. True healing involved the spirit as well as the body.
 - First, bodies are the place where the world is disclosed to us. In and through our bodies we come to know the world about us. *Awareness*
 - Second, through our bodies we act in the world. They are the means by which our purposes are realized. *Action*
 - Third, we relate to other in and through our bodies. They are the means of communion. *Relationship*
 - Fourth, in and through our bodies we know God. Hence, we speak not of the immortality of the soul only, but the resurrection of the body.
- III. Suffering
 - Suffering as limitation. Not just pain, but restraint, the press of something on us. Death is the ultimate suffering, mimicked in illness and infirmity.
 - Suffering marginalizes the individual. We may not be able to remove physical limitation, but we can “suffer with,” i.e., “compassion. The sufferer is related to something beyond themselves.
 - The church therefore is to be a community of compassion.
- IV. Healing in the Old Testament
- V. Healing in the New Testament – as noted earlier, in the Jewish understanding the body, mind, and spirit are intimately linked. But the healings of Jesus were written in the Greek language which does differentiate between physical healing and spiritual healing and uses different words to carefully categorize. This parsing is helpful in understanding the motivations behind Jesus’ healing miracles.