

God's Radical Love: True "Lump-In-The-Throat" Religion
A Farewell Sermon for St. John's Episcopal Church, Minneapolis
by The Rev. Craig Lemming, Curate
Sunday, September 2, 2018 – Proper 17: Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

In the name of the Triune God: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Growing up in Harare, our garden was a sacred place for me. Thanks to my Dad's green thumb and Zimbabwe's temperate climate, figs, guavas, mangos, apples, bananas, peaches, avocados, papayas, and mulberries flourished in our backyard. As a result, an abundance of tropical birds would nest in the trees. A daylong symphony of bird calls could be heard in our garden, beginning with the wild twitter arias of the masked weavers at dawn and ending with the spellbinding ostinato of the Laughing Dove's soothing coo at sunset. I have always been a nerd and as a child I was fascinated with Ornithology or the study of birds; and bird-watching led to my first encounter with God. I experienced the Divine in my first and only glimpse of the elusive, shy, male African Paradise Flycatcher.¹ I must have been about seven years old, reading and daydreaming in our garden, when a Paradise Flycatcher suddenly perched in the guava tree with a crunchy, green dragonfly clasped in his beak. The beauty of his bright blue face and his rust-red coat with two long tail streamers which curled at their ends was so exquisite that my eyes welled up with tears. When I wiped my tears away he was gone. I have

never forgotten that moment. I was on sacred ground. I experienced God and I was transformed in that inexplicable, mystical encounter with divine beauty.

Mary Farrell Bednarowski, Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at my alma mater – United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities – taught seminarians that true religious experiences elicit both an emotional and an intellectual response. Dr. Bednarowski believes that in true religion both our minds and our hearts are stirred simultaneously resulting in an ineffable, spiritual encounter with God which always manifests in that middle-place, between our heads and our hearts, as a sacred “lump in the throat.”² As I’ve been preparing to bid you all a fond farewell this morning, I give praise and thanks to God for countless Holy moments we have shared, experiencing God in sacred “lump-in-the-throat” encounters with the Divine together. The genuine beauty of God, which I glimpsed in my childhood encounter with the African Paradise Flycatcher, is in this place and in this faith community. And just as the opening of today’s Psalm proclaims, “My heart is stirring with a noble song,” so I bid your prayers that “my tongue shall be the pen of a skilled writer,”³ so that in that middle-place between our hearts and our minds, we may all know God’s truth again today, which is always and forever: radical love.

That sacred place between our heads and our hearts which moves us to our core and transforms us forever is the spiritual lesson Jesus teaches us in today's Gospel. Jesus denounces the fundamentalist intentions of the Pharisees and Scribes. We must remember that the Pharisees and Scribes were good, devoted people, who were simply too caught up in fussing and meticulously tending to their ancient religious customs to recognize the ultimate purpose of true religion. Jesus says to these two classes of the religious elite,

**Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,
'This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me,
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'
You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.⁴**

The commandment of God as Jesus taught us is always and forever to love. We know that truly religious encounters manifest when a sacred "lump in our throat" connects our hearts and our minds with God and with one another in love and belonging. We know in the marrow of our bones that to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind is the greatest and first commandment and to love our neighbor as ourselves is its equal; and that upon these two love commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.⁵ Love and belonging is the true purpose of religion, not our fussy policing of liturgics.

And yet, Jesus being fully human and fully divine, knew that this discipline of love, is incredibly complex. For the heart, that sacred place in which Love resides, is the very same place from which evil intentions come. Jesus says,

'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.' For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'⁶

Sadly, it would be all too easy to demonstrate the ways in which the 45th President of the United States exhibits each and every one these defilements. What is much more difficult and much more important, however, is to look courageously within myself and acknowledge that this litany of evil things come from within me and they defile me, too. I know that I am not alone in struggling with these shadows. Church is the one place we can get real about our shadows.

I was heartened to find Holy Wisdom in Robert A. Johnson's classic text, *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche*.⁷ Johnson's small but mighty book helps me to reconcile the fact that both our very best and our very worst intentions come from the same place: from within. Robert Johnson begins by affirming human wholeness; that "To honor and accept one's own shadow is a profound spiritual discipline. It is whole-making and thus holy and the

most important experience of a lifetime.”⁸ He goes on to write, “Some of the pure gold of our personality is relegated to the shadow” and this “gold is related to our higher calling, and this can be hard to accept.”⁹ Johnson discovered that “The religious process consists of restoring the wholeness of the personality. The word religion means to re-relate, to put back together again, to heal the wounds of separation.”¹⁰ Jesus invites us to do this hard, religious work of recognizing and owning the shadow within ourselves by naming the very worst intentions of the human heart in the Gospel’s long list of defilements with which humankind has continually struggled. Johnson warns us that when we fail to do our own shadow work, the shadow projections we receive from others will cause our own shadow to erupt, and warfare is inevitable.¹¹ Johnson counsels that, “To own one’s own shadow is to reach a holy place – an inner center – not attainable in any other way. To fail this is to fail one’s own sainthood and to miss the purpose of life.”¹² He writes of “sainthood in the original meaning of the word – a full-blooded embracing of our own humanity, not a one-sided goodness that has no vitality or life,” so that when we “pick up our own dark side, combine it with our hard-earned light, and make something better of it all than the opposition of the two. This would be true holiness.”¹³ Relating shadow work to Jesus’ Love Commandment, Johnson observes that,

We are advised to love our enemies, but this is not possible when the inner enemy, our own shadow, is waiting to pounce and make the most of an incendiary situation. If we can learn to love the inner enemy, then there is a chance of loving – and redeeming – the outer one.¹⁴

And just as that middle-place between our heads and our hearts, the “lump in the throat,” is how a truly religious encounter is experienced, Johnson understands religion as the art of binding opposites together in the sacred realm of paradox. He observes that in true religion, “we are able to entertain simultaneously two contradictory notions and give them equal dignity. Then, and only then, is there the possibility of grace, the spiritual experience of contradictions brought into a coherent whole – giving us a unity greater than either one of them.”¹⁵ Johnson encourages people of faith to “restore the word *religious* to its true meaning; then it will regain its healing power. To heal, to bond, to join, to bridge, to put back together again – these are our sacred faculties.”¹⁶

I believe that when we do our hard shadow work and courageously face our own dark side, we will embody the message from today’s Epistle from St. James:

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves... Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.¹⁷

Friends and beloved members of St. John's Episcopal Church, you cared for and nurtured me over these last two years and in my distress, you saved my life. You are doers of true religion which is love enacted. In 2016 when I met our beloved Susan Barnes working together with the marvelous team of volunteers from this faith community on renovating Liberty House – Circle of the Beloved's residence – I had no idea that accepting Susan's invitation to serve as your Transitional Deacon would lead to this life-saving Curacy and my restored immigrant status as a documented Religious Worker. You saved me from the threat of deportation and much, much worse. You are a faith community practicing true religion. You heal, you bond, you join, you bridge, and you put broken people, like me and countless others, back together again. You have changed me forever. In the words of African-American science fiction genius, Octavia Butler, remember that,

**All that you touch
You change.**

**All that you Change
Changes you.**

**The only lasting truth
Is change.**

**God
Is change.¹⁸**

Embracing the changes with which we have blessed each other, we celebrate new Seasons ahead. We give thanks for all our bittersweet “lump in the throat” encounters with God – past, present, and future – sacred encounters which integrate our light and our shadow and connect our hearts and our minds with God and one another. May the true religion of healing, bonding, and mutual belonging continue to bless us as we journey on. And in closing, just as my Divine encounter with the African Paradise Flycatcher in the garden of my childhood transformed me forever, may each of us, through tears of gratitude, wonder, and awe, continue to say “Yes!” to our Beloved God who tenderly calls to us,

**Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtle-dove
is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.¹⁹**

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ <https://www.hbw.com/ibc/photo/african-paradise-flycatcher-terpsiphone-viridis/male-african-paradise-flycatcher-flight>

² Mary Farrell Bednarowski, "Lump in the Throat Stories," in *Arts, Theology, and the Church*, ed. Kimberly Vrudny and Wilson Yates (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005): 50-70.

³ Psalm 45:1 (NRSV).

⁴ Mark 7:6-8.

⁵ Matthew 22:37-39.

⁶ Mark 7:14-15, 20-23.

⁷ Robert A. Johnson, *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

⁸ Johnson, x.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹² *Ibid.*, 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁷ James 1:17-27.

¹⁸ Octavia E. Butler, *Parable Series*, vol. book 1, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993), 3.

¹⁹ Song of Songs 2:10-13.