

Mystery and Community

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: 1st Corinthians 13:11-13

As you have heard me say many times, Howard Thurman, the African American theologian, would conclude his sermons by saying, “I don’t know, I don’t know, it may be...” In closing this way, Thurman left his hearers with much to contemplate. Long after the thoughts in the sermon might be forgotten, the depth of the speaker’s humility would be remembered. *It may be...*

***Humility.* It is a spiritual quality that we could use more of these days. We are living in a time when too many people seem more and more certain of their opinions and beliefs, with precious little room in their minds and conversation for doubt. Apparently, the more often and the more loudly people proclaim their thoughts and beliefs, the more their hearers will become convinced of their truth. Raising questions, looking at possible exceptions or maintaining a healthy level of doubt toward one’s assumptions, are rarely evident in today’s public discourse.**

Why is there an ever-increasing *cacophony of certitudes* that paralyze discourse? Why have so many of our minds and hearts closed to any challenge put forth by those who disagree with our beliefs?

I suggest that one reason is our *discomfort with mystery*. Such discomfort has many origins, from the rapid change that we experience every day, thus increasing our hunger for certainty, to the lack of time for reflective thought when we can muse, simmer, and question our stated beliefs. It seems to me that if we are to know *Truth*, we should be comfortable in the mystery that surrounds us. This is especially true of the religious seeker. No matter how much we try to define God and systematize our process of knowing, there will always be mystery beyond our knowledge.

I was a young boy when I first heard the words of the seventeenth century Quaker theologian, Robert Barclay. Sitting in the silence of the Minneapolis Friends Meeting, I heard my father quote the following words many times as he spoke out of the quiet: “Not by strength of arguments or by a particular disquisition of each doctrine and convincement of my understanding thereby, came I to receive and bear witness of the *Truth*, but by *secretly* being reached by the Life...For when I came into the silent assemblies of God’s people, I felt a *secret* power among them, which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it, I felt the evil in me weakening, and the good raised up.”

“Secretly being reached by the Life...” And, “I felt a secret power among them...” Barclay uses the word “secret” or “secretly” twice in this brief description of his experience. It seems an odd use of the word, and yet it is, perhaps, the only way that he could describe what had touched his soul so profoundly. It is to acknowledge the awesome mystery of God. Not the kind of mystery or secret associated with a God who loomed high above the human race in a faraway heaven, but, instead, a “secret power” which was felt in this earthly realm, and which could actually move one to feel the “evil weakening” and “the good raised up.”

To accept the truth that mystery surrounds us is to accept our human frailty and admit with the Apostle Paul that we do, indeed, “see in a mirror dimly.” The more we grow spiritually and come to know the living God, the more we will become comfortable with mystery, and recognize that there is so much more to learn.

Another reason for today’s cacophony of certitudes may be *a focus on individualism*, that overshadows the importance of a diverse community that lovingly challenges our certitudes. We are a nation of individuals. There is little within our national tradition that emphasizes community. This individualism has been with American culture since its beginning and involves giving priority to the concerns of the individual’s life and fulfillment, over a

concern for the whole of our society. For instance, note the national debate over gun ownership. How many mass shootings by unstable people does a society tolerate before we re-examine the Second Amendment to the Constitution? Within the realm of religious faith, this involves giving priority to individual spiritual needs over the mission of the faith community.

We need one another to help check and balance our belief systems, as well as the certitudes we express. Anna Quindlen wrote an article titled, *Life of the Closed Mind*, in which she ponders, “Is that true? Maybe I should change my mind? When was the last time you can remember a public dialogue that followed that useful discourse?” I hope that as we work out the faith by which we live within the beloved community, such a dialogue will always be open to us.

Learning to be comfortable in mystery, as well as being a part of a diverse faith community that challenges our certitudes, seems to be a healthy way to go about the process of spiritual growth. I believe that in this process, we will also recover that most important spiritual virtue, *humility*. As we go through a very difficult time as a nation, where there is and will continue to be a raging debate over the impeachment of a president, writer, George Will offers words that can be applied to our public discourse: “America is currently awash in an unpleasant surplus of clanging, clashing certitudes. It has been well said that

the spirit of liberty is the spirit of not being too sure that you are right. One way to immunize ourselves against misplaced certitude is to contemplate, even savor, the strangeness of everything, including ourselves.” *I don’t know, I don’t know, it may be...*