

Homily for October 19<sup>th</sup>: 5:00 p.m. liturgy

St. Augustine's Episcopal Church

Croton on Hudson, New York

Not quite a year ago, I met my friend Mary for coffee at Starbuck's. I had just completed a research paper on the needs of veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mary is a therapist at the Psychotherapy and Spirituality Institute, which is made up of pastoral counseling centers located at four Churches in Manhattan. We began to talk about the wounds of war that are not being adequately tended by the agencies charged to do so. The Psychotherapy and Spirituality Institute was interested in reaching out to veterans but did not quite know how. Mary and I have worked together on a number of projects, including a few trips to Latin America where we endeavored to teach about the impact of trauma among people who have known nothing else for more than 500 years. We agreed over coffee that while we did not have any specific ideas about what we wanted to do, we would keep talking, learning, and expanding our networks in an effort to clarify what we might be able to offer to vets. Early on in the process, we realized that what we needed to do first was listen. Last Friday PSI teamed with Intersections International and held a first of its kind meeting of veterans, VA and military chaplains, young men recently returned from Iraq, a woman who after 10 years of military service was once homeless with three children and now serves as an executive director of a community based agency for veterans, psychotherapists, educators and an Anglican priest whose work against apartheid resulted in arrest, torture, and a letter bomb that cost him both hands, the sight in one eye, and a traumatic brain injury. We were gathered around a single question: what can we do to bind and heal the wounds of war, regardless of what we think about the war itself.

It will take us several weeks to sift through the concrete ideas, suggestions, and wise recommendations that we had recorded by day's end. What lingers in my heart, however, as the overarching truth is that the process itself was healing beyond anything we anticipated when planning the meeting. Like Moses directly speaking and listening to God, we were on the holy ground of the stories that detail the wounds,

and yet hold the potential for healing not just of individuals, but of a nation. Earlier in the week, I had attended a meeting of chaplains and combat veterans from the Vietnam War, engaged in the same sacred process. Gathered in a retreat house where there were signs on the wall that said "SILENCE! GOD IS SPEAKING TO YOU" – a bit of a taunt given that the meeting was in New Orleans and we could almost smell the French Quarter from there – I came to understand that God speaks most clearly through the shared communion of human suffering and rebirth. What was striking to me at these meetings is that we were, and are, all in it together, despite the endless ways we find to separate our hearts and minds from each other, and within ourselves. A refrain from both meetings was "we heal and are healed together, one set of eyes at a time."

Today's readings provide interesting insights and imagery about seeing the face of God. Moses wants to see the fullness of God's glory and promises that he not only can handle it, he will lead others to praise God's mercy and glory. God's replies "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live" then decides to allow Moses to see God's back while passing by Moses, revealing an incomplete glimpse at one side of God. Centuries and the history of a people later, the face of God is fully revealed in Jesus. We then discover that in the ordinary flesh of human beings, God is present with a love we struggle to grasp. God's face is compassionate, broken, strong, loving, appropriately angry, the source of hope, and filled with our human story. When we look in the eyes of God, we find ourselves literally and figuratively, and therein, discover the source of our healing. This is not always easy to accept, or indeed, to endure. Most of the time catching a glimpse of the shadow of God's passing is all that we hope for or want. We know from the way we split ourselves, others, and our experience of the sacred apart that for our most familiar, albeit alienating, ways of being defend themselves mightily.

So it is that the Pharisees hook up in today's gospel with the Herodians to try and trick Jesus into saying something worthy of the Roman death penalty. They are hoping for a "gotcha" statement against the occupying government of Rome, if not Cesar himself. This question is asked not in a spirit of inquiry, but out of malice. Jesus answers them in a way that reframes the question within the overarching authority of God. It is a clever response, to be sure, and one that sent the questions away amazed, but it also points to and foreshadows the true revelation of God that comes in the succeeding passages of Matthew's gospel. We will soon hear in response to another

set up question about resurrection of the body that we are cared for by the God of the living, and shortly thereafter we are given the commandment to love one another as well as ourselves, nourished by a love that transcends all the ways we would seek to contain it. We see the face of God not in our complicated theories or trick questions, but in the day to day act of living in the presence of both unspeakable suffering and holy resilience.

I saw the face of God in the people gathered at the veteran's meetings as we joined stories together in a lament that echoed any to be found in the scriptural canon. We listened to, and made, music which is perhaps one of the most enduring metaphors I know of for the presence of grace in our lives. And yes, God was definitely speaking to all of us, sometimes most deeply in the silences between our inadequate words. Father Michael Lapsley, the Anglican priest so terribly wounded by the violence in South Africa, describes his "Healing of Memories" institute and work as telling the story of suffering in the context of our whole lives and identities, recognizing our strengths, mourning our losses, and daring to envision new ways of being even in the midst of a grossly imperfect world. That is what brings us to community and communion, our daily altars of brokenness and strength, God's own face reflected in the mirrors of our lives. Earlier in the Exodus story, we were given the image of manna in the wilderness that had to be gathered each day and would not keep in storage. A communion that heals the wounds of all of our wars needs daily attention. We need to lament, we need to sing, we need to dance, we need to look in each other's eyes each day not with the intention of fixing things, but humbly receiving the human story that breaks our hearts and returns us to our souls. Life sometimes gives us extraordinary access to that story, as I have experienced over the past several days. I suspect that I will be pondering that gift for some time, trusting that the next steps in the process will be revealed. What I do know today is that when we pray for peace and an end to war and suffering, we are opening our hearts to the reality that transformation is more than a cease fire. It is a deep embrace of our humanity in this day, this church, this broken world and the truth that, as June Gordon writes in her "Poem for South African Women": *we are the ones that we have been waiting for.*

We are the face of God.

Teresa Rhodes McGee

