

ROOM WITH A VIEW; JOHN 17:6-19; MAY 24, 2009
THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

There's a big difference between a room with a view and a room without a view. I have stayed in hotels in New York which looked out onto the brick wall of the building next to it or the alleyway and garage below. These were rooms without a view. Less costly I am sure. Places to hang a hat and rest your head for the night but not to be inspired.

Then there are rooms with a view. I just had one on a recent trip to Lake Placid. Pull the curtains back and the room opened up onto Whiteface Mountain. Spectacular! Or the little cottage in New Hampshire almost every room with a view – my favorite was the master bedroom looking out onto Lake Winnepesaukee, Rattlesnake Island and the Presidential Range of the White Mountains.

Just to look onto a lake or mountain or down on the busy life of a city inspires reflection, expansive thought, and a sense of gratitude for the gift of life. Sometimes the grinding routine shrinks our view of the world until we find ourselves in some room with a view.

In his prayer that ends the Gospel of John, Jesus says he has “made God known” to his followers. To make a name known is to make the very essence of the person known.

These ragtag disciples may not know many things, but they know the true God. There is no other God behind Jesus, no greater knowledge of God to be had than looking at this Jew from Nazareth in whom the fullness of God chose to dwell.

While Islam forbids representations of God and Judaism historically refuses to utter the name of God, Christianity, says Marcus Borg, finds the primary revelation of God in a person. This does not make Christianity superior just different. Because Christians find the ultimate disclosure of God in a person and not a book, Jesus is more central than the Bible.ⁱ

In today's Scripture reading Jesus talks about himself as a kind of room with a view. Through Jesus we see the fullness of God. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and our life with him as our guide we know God.

Perhaps you've heard the old metaphor of Jesus as a window. I am expanding that to say that Jesus is more than a window onto God.

Rather his life creates space for us to live our lives – parables we can trust like the floor upon which we walk, promises we can sink our tired bodies into like a familiar chair when life is hard. What I am trying to say is that everything we know about God we know by living in and with Christ.

Yet, in our 21st century world we struggle with who Jesus is and what he does.

It is interesting that the big debate in the first century was whether Jesus was human. Everyone believed he was the Divine Spark Itself but many questioned whether he was actually human. Today the debate is just the opposite. We do not doubt his humanity but we question his divinity.ⁱⁱ

It has led in some parts of the church to the downsizing or secularization of the church because while we see him as a good example we do not see him as the complete revelation of God.

There is no small irony here since if ever a time and people needed God it is now. Working our way through a recession, being at war – a sense of God's presence; God's direction; God's purposes would be helpful to say the least.

I am not suggesting that we need Jesus now to make it all better or to fix it or to lead us in battle against our enemies. But I am saying that we could use some divine revelation about life, about trusting the source of life when times are hard, about serving our neighbor and loving our enemies.

Yet, it is true that while Jesus offers comfort and guidance he can also be something of a mystery. There are times in John's Gospel when he is cagey and evasive.

Apparently, denying his mother's request then turning 180 gallons of water into wine; using a whip to drive the money changers out of the temple where they'd been doing business as usual for years; talking like a Zen master befuddling one of the great teachers of Israel; breaking religious laws that were followed for centuries. Responding enigmatically when people said "who are you?" with comments like "I'm bread," "I'm the vine," "I'm the door...the good shepherd...the living water."

But then here at the end of this at times perplexing Gospel he lifts the veil and says "the Father and I are one. If you've seen me, you've seen God."ⁱⁱⁱ

Coleridge said Christianity is not a doctrine but a life. That's what makes Jesus' words so wonderful and so frustrating.

Jesus was not some Almighty God stuffed into human form. He was the fullness of God. "In the beginning was the Word. And the Word (the Christ) was with God...And the Word was God." That's how John's Gospel opens.

So when Jesus does confusing or unexpected things or seems like a mystery to us sometimes his words that he and God are one can take on an edge. But just as we cannot reduce the mystery of a human being into a personality test or psychological label we cannot reduce Jesus finally to a metaphor or theological formula. There is no substitute for getting to know him and live with him in your heart.

How do you know if you are a Christian? You are a Christian if you are somebody seeking after, trying to figure out, imitate, and falling in love with this Jew from Nazareth who was one with the Creator.

The job of a Jew is to know and live Torah, the job of a Christian is to know Jesus and live with him.

The more we get to know Jesus—not as a set of doctrinal statements but as a living presence in real life situations; when we face hardship, loss, or despair as well as joy and renewal—the more we get to know him as we would a friend or loved one on our day to day journey the more sense his words and actions make; the greater our awareness of his presence alongside of us; the more inclined we are to call upon him to figure out how to handle life's latest surprise or disappointment.

What happens then, over time, is that we become for others – on occasion, in glimpses – a “room with a view.”

Others see through us the goodness of God, the expansiveness of life; the parables and promises of Scripture come true.

John’s Gospel says to love Christ is to know him. In other words, it is to have him as a living presence in your heart and life and consequently to be a living sign yourself of God’s intention for the human family. Amen.

ⁱ William H. Willimon, “Jesus as God,” *Pulpit Resource*, April – June, 2009, 38.

ⁱⁱ Willimon, 38.

ⁱⁱⁱ Willimon 39.