

“The Rabbi’s Gift”

Sermon on Sunday, January 28, 2024

“What if God was one of us, just a stranger on the bus, trying to make his way home...” J. Osborne

Dear church,

Sometimes wisdom comes to us from places next door, places not necessarily connected to what’s familiar to us. Sometimes it takes a while to break down the truth conveyed to us, to make sense of it, discover the deeper meaning of it. All of that is part of this beautiful story which our friend Bill O’ Brien shared with me and which we read at our confirmation retreat in early January, “The Rabbi’s Gift.”

Joan Osborne’s song notwithstanding, our minds tend to struggle with the idea that God is one of us and, to be fair, the Bible offers different perspectives on the subject. In some of the texts, most of the OT texts in fact, the “otherness” of God is emphasized. We recall the Exodus story on Mount Sinai with God keeping a distance on the mountain, shrouded in clouds while the people stay below. Or the way Job received messages from the proverbial man above, who spoke to Job at the end of the book through natural spectacles, essentially telling him, “Who are you to judge me?” I recall to this day one of the Sunday School lessons that my uncle taught as a life-long volunteer of the church, referring to the passage from Exodus 33 when God says to Moses, “You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” All those passages and more speak about the “otherness” of God. Meister Eckhart, the Medieval German mystic once compared us to ants on an ant hill. Who are we to define God from our ant hill? We can’t look beyond the sphere of our world; we just know there is a bigger reality out there...

But now Joan Osborne is approaching it from a different angle. She asks, “What if God is one of us, just a stranger on a bus, trying to make his way home...” The song came out in 1995, is almost 30 years old now, but it still speaks to me; it spoke to our students when we sang it at the retreat; it has an important message to convey, and that message is rooted in the gospel, in the New Testament, in the Christian faith, in our differentiated understanding of God. Who is Jesus but the God who became one of us? What are the gospels about - but God’s descent into this world, into the messy, often painful, sometimes joyful, realities of human life? And Jesus himself points out an even bolder thought picked up in Osborne’s song. At one point he talks about people who are in prison, homeless, hopeless, and says, “Whatever you have done to one of those people, you have done to me.” Consider those folks part of who I am! There is bold theology in the New Testament, so bold that some Christians were persecuted in the early centuries, the audacity of seeing God as one of us is written all over the gospels.

At the same time, we are not perfect, and we know it. We can’t walk on water, we can’t turn water into wine the last time I checked, we often don’t live up to the teachings of Christ. We are not godlike. I think it is more appropriate to say that the image of God lives in every human being. Sometimes it’s hard to see that image and sometimes we can feel it clearly in the

presence of another person. The story of the Rabbi's gift is about a community that had lost its vision and enthusiasm for the gospel. I imagine at some point they just went through the motions like... parishioners sometimes. We go to church because we should go to church, we say our prayers and all those routines are appreciated, but how alive are we as a community? When the wise rabbi, consulted by the leaders of the Christian monastery, tells them, "One of you is the Messiah, the anointed one, who is blessed with god-presence," they first make the mistake of trying to find someone who is perfect. Predictably, they find flaws and imperfections in everyone. "My God, this person sometimes doesn't flush the toilet. He can't be the Messiah!" "Boy, o boy, that person is on the cell phone all the time, even during mealtimes. Can't be the Messiah." "How about this one? He once made fun of someone else. Not Messiah material!" And so, they narrow the scope of God's presence among them, narrow it all the way down to the monstrance in the church that holds the body of Christ, the monstrance as the last resort of God among us. And they miserably fail to notice the god-presence among them.

Until someone changed the direction of their thinking and pointed out the gifts, the qualities and spiritual potential in everyone. They started to see... "This person has a divine voice, Messiah voice material." "That person always finds a way to help others... God must be alive in him..." And so on and so forth. The fictional story concludes, "Miraculously, over time, this process caused them to view each one of them as the Messiah. The quality of love began to grow among the monks..." And then their numbers grew again, but first, before they grew in numbers, the quality of love began to grow among them.

How much are we able to see God's image in other people, in the church and elsewhere, way beyond the walls of this house of God? It will make a difference in the way we treat each other, feel about one another and in the way we are church together. What if God was one of us?" Or: "What if God dwelled in all of us?" The Apostle Paul once wrote, "We are all temples of the Holy Spirit." Saint John wrote in the Book of Revelation, "See, the home of God is among mortals."

I wondered what inspired Joan Osborne to write "What if God is one of us?" And I found out... she didn't write it. She became face and the voice of the song. But it was written by a musician named Eric Bazilian. He said, "For me, the song was more about what happens to you when you look at something that has completely changed your world view, which could be meeting God, it could be meeting an alien, it could be a near-death experience, it could be anything like that. Just how everything you know is wrong, or everything you know is right, and you didn't know it."

I appreciate the fact that this song wasn't written for Christian purposes per se. It was the result of a creative process, which makes it ever more precious. Because God is at work in this world – in artists, in athletes, in scientists, in people on the bus and commuters in the car. What if God is in all of us? Think about it...

Amen.