

Easter 6 C
Revelation 21:1-6, 22:1-5
Acts 16:9-15
May 9, 2010 (Mother's Day)

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One of my professors in seminary, Roberta Bondi, wrote a little book that has meant a lot to me. It's called *Memories of God*. Bondi had a particular experience growing up in the US in the 1950s and 60s, of struggling with the fact of being a girl in a family with women on her mother's side who were smart and strong, yet with a father who taught her that women were not as smart, not as strong as men. He loved her, but in his eyes, if she had been a boy, she really could have been somebody. Roberta struggled with her vision of herself—what she learned from her daddy and from her mama, and what she learned about God and her relationship to God. This professor ended up with a deep understanding of God as her Mother—this was an image that was very powerful for her, and one that ended up affirming who she was much more than what she had learned about God as a little girl. Once she accepted the idea of God as Mother, she was able to love herself more freely.

Bondi's process is a long story, and I would encourage you to read the book if you're interested. But one statement she wrote in that process has always stuck with me. Bondi writes: "It has always been the deepest of mysteries to me that my mother has an intimate knowledge of me as a baby and as child that I myself can never have access to at all. It is as though a fundamental part of me has existence only in my mother's memory, and when my mother dies this part of me will die, too. In the same

way, God my mother holds the whole of me forever in God's ever-present memory, and God will never die" (pp. 108-109).

In our land of self-made men and women, rugged individualists and personal responsibility, the story of the faith bears witness to this perhaps contrary fact: Our lives find their true meaning only in a larger context—a context of relationship and interdependence. Whatever our uniqueness, whatever good or bad might be true of us in an abstract sense, our lives only actually mean something in relationship with someone or something else. I'm not trying to make a big philosophical point here, as that would quickly break down—just say that this is central to how we know who we are and what our lives mean.

We have two different texts today that point toward the kinds of relationships that tell us who we are and why we're here. The first comes from the Book of Revelation, the last two chapters of the last book of the Bible. The whole book is actually the report of a vision, which came to a man named John during a time when the church was suffering terrible persecution at the hands of the Roman authorities. Just being a Christian could get you killed, and there were understandably some who wondered whether it was worth it. Some of you have been studying this book in a Bible study, and you know that there are all sorts of things here, some of them disturbing, with some of the disturbing things falling smack in the middle of the section we read from today. But I want to focus on what for me is the final, overarching word of this book, a word of hope for Christians whose lives were on the line, who had to be clear about their identity and which relationships defined them.

The word of hope in Revelation is summed up in the vision of the holy city of God, the new Jerusalem. One writer pointed out that this city is more remarkable for what's not in it than for what is—there are no armies, no tanks, no rich and poor, no economy of trade or competition, not even sun or moon or streetlamp. But what is there is the presence of God, whose face the people see, and whose light the people's faces reflect back. What is there is a river and a tree: the water of life, bright as crystal, quenching all thirst; the fruit of the tree of life, soothing all hunger; the leaves of the tree, healing the nations of their hurt and war and hatred. This vision of the city coming down out of heaven represents, in part, our restoration to the Garden of Eden. That garden, of course, was the place where once we human beings chose to go our own way; we chose to eat from the tree what did not belong to us, and so we chose an identity and relationship different from what God offered us.

That's what happened in the garden, in the beginning, but here, in the vision of Revelation, at the end of things, we see ourselves, as part of God's people, restored as a people gathered around the tree, deriving our life from that tree in the way God intends, knowing our rightful place, our proper place in relation to God, and living out that reconciled, peaceful relationship. In this vision, we are restored to the place, the context, for which God created us. And all is made well. We call this vision Heaven, and maybe it is. But it's also the end for which we live now, the goal or fulfillment of our very existence. It's what tells us who we are, and why we're here, in this life. We are people living into that future, into that hope.

We are also people who live into each other's lives. That happens a lot of different ways—we can all think of lots of relationships that tell us who we are, especially on this Mother's Day, people we know and love and care about who provide the context in which we live. But in the scripture from Acts we see that context pushed out farther, to include people we don't know or care about yet. Paul is the one who receives this other sort of vision, not of heaven, but of a man in a foreign land, saying, "Come over here and help us." So he goes, and he takes Silas with him as a traveling companion, and they reach Philippi, on the edge of what we know as Europe. And in this new and unfamiliar context, what do the missionaries Paul and Silas find but women gathered on the Sabbath, praying to the one true of God. They were Gentiles, non-Jews, but they had already heard the word somehow and had become what was known at the time as "God worshippers."

So even when Paul and Silas stepped out in this wholly new way, based just on a dream, God had already been there before them, tilling the ground and making it ready to receive the seed of the word. And Lydia, who is known by her association with rich people, the only ones who could afford to buy the purple cloth she sold, takes on a new relationship for herself, the relationship of baptism. She re-orientes her own identity toward God and toward a whole bunch of other baptized people, many who couldn't afford her cloth. And she begs Paul and Silas to come and stay in her home, so that she might show them hospitality.

Do you see what has happened here? And can you imagine it happening to us? The Spirit of God and the love of God seek to give us comfort and hope and assurance,

a safe place in the family, a safe place like that holy city. But the Spirit seems to want to include absolutely everyone on that project. So our safe circle just expands all the time. Do you know how uncomfortable that can be? It's what is killing the church in some places in this country, churches that have been around for a while and like things the way they are. Why can't we just leave things alone? I don't know the answer except to say that the Holy Spirit of God is not generally in the business of leaving things alone. So we can ask, where in our lives, and in our life together, has God already gone before us, making the ground ready, preparing hearts to hear the testimony the Spirit is stirring up in us, even now? Where have we not yet thought to go? What is the new shape of the context God is creating around us?

You are a congregation with a vibrant history; on June 8 you'll reach your 30th anniversary as a chartered UMC. There are only a couple of you left who remember that beginning, though there are more of you who showed up not long after. But through those 30 years, you have been marked as a body that is not content to just sit and let things be. More than once you've had the opportunity to become a nice, quiet chapel for retired people, but you've never chosen that path. Your mothers and fathers in the faith built a playground and opened a nursery when they hardly had any kids. You built a new sanctuary, knowing that it would invite new and different people, and knowing that everything would feel different as a result. And now you're stretching and challenging yourself financially to accomplish some of the work Kevin described to us, sharing the precious gift of life we have encountered in Christ.

We need to know that these acts of faithfulness are essential—writing the check or clicking the bill pay, inviting the neighbor, noticing and meeting the needs of children and families in our midst. There is no one but us to do these things, no one but us to be stewards of what has fallen within our care. Yet whatever we do, whatever we become willing to risk or give for the sake of the gospel, it happens in a context that is bigger than we are and bigger than we can even see. It a context created by God and one that includes people we don't know and to be honest half the time don't want to know. Much depends on our efforts, but only because God has first made it possible for it to be so.

Our lives will only find their full meaning when they find their place in the life of God—God who gave us life and who knows and loves us better than even our own mothers. God is the one making all things new—at work behind the scenes and under the table and in the shadows, when we're not looking, making things ready. We need to stay connected to that fact, always seeking that relationship. And we must remember that somebody else out there also needs that gift. Somebody out there needs that relationship, the hope we have received, a vision of the battle, still apparently raging around us, yet already won for all time through the power of Christ; a vision of a love that gives us purpose and that will not let us go.

These words are trustworthy and true: Our lives are not our own. The world is God's; the future is God's; our relationships and our lives and everything in them belong to God—and that, brothers and sisters, changes everything.

My Life - Iris Dement

My life, it don't count for nothing.
When I look at this world, I feel so small.
My life, it's only a season:
A passing September that no one will recall.

But I gave joy to my mother.
And I made my lover smile.
And I can give comfort to my friends when they're hurting.
And I can make it seem better for a while.

My life, it's half the way travelled,
And still I have not found my way out of this night.
An' my life, it's tangled in wishes,
And so many things that just never turned out right.

But I gave joy to my mother.
And I made my lover smile.
And I can give comfort to my friends when they're hurting.
And I can make it seem better,
I can make it seem better,
I can make it seem better for a while.