

I don't know about you, but can I just say that I am truly grateful for Philip? This cannot be his proudest moment, and yet, it is such a human moment, isn't it? The disciples are all troubled as Jesus begins this, his "farewell discourse," but Philip has been around so long we might expect more from him.

Everything we know about Philip comes from John's Gospel. Philip was one of the first three disciples that Jesus called in the first chapter of John. Philip had been hanging around John the Baptizer, who alerted Philip to Jesus, the Lamb of God. Philip brought Nathaniel to Jesus and Philip was among those who witnessed the first sign at the wedding at Cana. Jesus asked Philip to feed the 5,000.

And yet, even after all those first-hand experiences and more, here at the Last Supper, Philip is looking for tangible evidence. "Lord, *show* us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Thomas, who has essentially asked Jesus for a map and directions to where he is going, will get the evidence he most needs later. But this morning, Jesus speaks to Philip: "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?"

I wonder if Jesus is the least bit surprised. Clearly, this is not a simple notion for people to grasp. It is as difficult for us in the 21st c. to loosen our grip on our habitual thinking as it was for the disciples in the first century. We can become so rigidly fixed in one perspective that we start to act automatically. Psychologists refer to that state as "mindlessness." And in a mindless state, fresh insights, new openness and increased flexibility become impossible.

When we are in a mindless state, confrontation can shut down access to our brain's higher functions. We lose our ability to direct our attention. Even our memories become suspect and our bodies dump "fight, flight or freeze" chemicals into our systems. In mindless states, we may not literally kill people, but we can still hurt each other by reacting to conflict automatically. At the very least, in mindless states even well-intended people of faith can dismiss or ignore visions of God that we can't make sense of or that we don't agree with.

The mob of religious authorities who killed Stephen in the reading from Acts is absolutely certain that Stephen is blaspheming against God. They have allowed their fear to lock them into a collective state of mindlessness. They are locked inside *one* perspective about *how* God reveals God's self and to *whom*. Consequently, there's no room to test their assumptions and conclusions; no flexibility in their imaginations to entertain fresh insights.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus gives his disciples an alternative; an opening that calms their concerns without dismissing them. He gives Philip, Thomas and the rest of his disciples just the barest moment of pause: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

Now, this teaching should sound familiar; it may even recall memories of earlier teachings. But in the context of Jesus preparing his disciples for a radical change in his presence with them, his teaching has fresh, inspirational qualities. Jesus is leading his listeners away from mindless reactivity and toward mindful openness.

To put it bluntly, Jesus is blowing open Philip’s entire frame of reference. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” *This* phrase illuminates and gives life to another phrase in this reading that always seems to get more attention: “I am the way and the truth and the life.”

If we hear that phrase in a state of habitual mindlessness – from an overly constricted perspective – we can miss our invitation into mindful and mystical experiences. Jesus is not sanctioning a rigid standpoint about who is right and who is wrong. John’s Jesus came not to condemn nor to exclude, but to save; to return all of creation to right relationship.

Only from a state of mindful openness can we catch a flickering glimpse of the stunning mystery of the Christ event. We can *describe* it like this: the life, actions and awareness of Jesus Christ are the authentic image of God’s own life, action and awareness. The life, actions and awareness of Christ are *illuminated by* and are *one with* the light of God; the light of all people that was in the beginning with God and that was God.

Now, *describing* the mystery is not the same as *experiencing* it. Describing a gooseberry pie is not the same as tasting one. What we *say* about the mystery is *not* the mystery. And yet, we have to say something.

Let me tell you a story. St. Anselm of Canterbury was a Benedictine monk and abbot, and a philosopher and theologian who became the Archbishop of Canterbury at the turn of the 12th c. While he was an abbot, Anselm created an argument for the existence of God as an exercise for his monks to ponder.

Without driving you to tears with details, Anselm’s proposition was that “God is that than which nothing greater can be thought.” Anselm noticed that he could imagine a being who was the greatest being possible. But if his description of a greatest possible being didn’t include existence, Anselm reasoned, then there must be a being who was greater still: one that *did* exist.

For centuries, philosophers and theologians have chewed on Anselm's argument. Now, there are theological advancements that go beyond this medieval argument, but something intriguing happens when you go through the thought process.

Anselm's gift is not a *proof* of God, but a *practice* that can open us into *experiences* of God. Imagine an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving being. God is greater than that. Now imagine that being to be the all-merciful source of all justice. God is greater than that. If we think of this being as also the source of all truth, beauty and goodness, God is greater still.

Expanding our thoughts and imaginations about God keeps us always approaching God without ever arriving. We discover that, at our best, we are only orienting ourselves to a constantly receding horizon. And yet, with time and practice, what begins to dawn on us is that the *mystery* of God seems always to be present with us. With perseverance, that mystical presence begins to comfort and support us.

The sheer inscrutability of God becomes consoling. Instead of the temporary reassurance we get from certainty, our hearts begin to relax into an active and deepening trust in the mystery. Instead of closing our hearts and minds like the mob that murdered Stephen, we begin to live into an ever-widening state of mindfulness. A state of unknowing openness that enhances what we know.

The more we relax into this extraordinary state of mindful knowing and unknowing, the more our fears lose power. Our fears and our knowledge don't go away, they are taken up – transcended and included – in ever more encompassing truths, exposing us to more and more of God's unfathomable love.

The more we learn about the Word of God, the more mysterious it becomes, even as it become increasingly present and real to us. To know what God is like, we learn from the life and character of Jesus Christ, the visible image of the invisible God. We don't find exclusion, rejection, constriction, elitism, favoritism or condemnation. Instead, we learn about compassion, wholeness, reconciliation, forgiveness, inclusion and love.

The Risen Christ has been with us for 2,000 years, and yet, like Philip, we often do not seem to know him. Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus demonstrates absolute, unconditional and universal love. His life is the model for living in ways that expand our capacity for encountering God without fully comprehending God.

And yet, in our fallible, mortal search for certainty, we sometimes turn the phrase “I AM the way, the truth and the life” into a blunt instrument of judgment, exclusion and rejection. When we allow our flawed, human selves to become mindless, we can take this teaching out of context and misuse it to contradict every other “I AM” statement in John’s Gospel.

We too readily turn the phrase: “No one comes to the Father except through me” into a declaration of prohibition rather than a word of promise. We forget everything we have seen in the life of Jesus and the way that he accepted and treated all people, especially those on our self-created margins.

When we allow ourselves to become fearfully mindless, we try to shoe-horn God into a perspective that we hope to manage; one with our own artificial boundaries that staunch the flow of life and love. We protect our perspectives with dividing walls that exclude, shame or demonize people who disagree with us.

Jesus Christ gave himself to us as the authentic image of God’s own life. He showed us how to come ever closer to God by giving each other life and love, by restoring wholeness and by seeking understanding.

But here’s why I am grateful for Philip; after *all* he had seen and heard, he struggled to understand. Like many of us do. Like I do. Jesus never condemned Philip, but instead simply showed him – and you and me – how to mindfully and joyfully live with God, who is greater than we can ever imagine.

Works consulted:

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