

Being the Face of God

Genesis 33:1-11

Rev. Alida Ward - 10/8/17

The leaves are turning,
the days have grown shorter,
now and again there's a chill in the air —
all of which means that it is **wedding** season at Greenfield Hill Church.
Fall has long since overtaken summer as the season to get married;
and so far this fall David and I have been marrying folks every single Saturday,
and we'll keep it going for a good while longer.

That's fine with me — I **love** doing weddings.
Because nobody has it better during a wedding than the pastor.
Yes, there's work ahead of time,
meetings with the couple,
this premarital questionnaire thing that we spend a long time processing.
But during the actual wedding?
It's the **best**.
First of all, I don't have to worry about what to wear —
'cause that never changes.
But what's truly awesome is that I get the privilege of standing right up here with a
couple in love, right next to them,
seeing them holding each other's hands tight for support,
hearing them whisper nervous encouragement to each other.
And, best of all, I get to see the faces, all of them:
the faces of the parents in the front pews, looking up at their children with such pride
and hope and emotion —
of the grandparents behind them beaming with joy —
and of the couple themselves — I get to see the look on their faces when they first see
each other,

the earnest intensity of their gaze when they say to each other “for better and for worse.”

I get a front row seat to see the faces of love, all around me.

A few weeks ago, I shared the wedding with another minister, a priest named Father Leo.

The groom’s family had asked if I would include him, he was an old family friend — and of course I said I was happy to.

He was a lovely man, my father’s age or older, and I assumed he had retired from some little country church somewhere.

I found out later that *actually* what he’d retired from was being president of Georgetown University — kind of a big deal, the campus center is named after him.

You would have never known. He was gracious and gentle.

And what Father Leo said to the couple that day was so beautiful and so true that it made us all tear up even more than we already were.

He asked the couple to gaze on each other’s faces, those faces filled with that earnest love.

And he said to them, “the face you are looking upon now is God’s face.

Because that is what you will be to each other.

Whenever one of you is hurting, the face of the other will be God’s face, looking upon you with compassion.

Whenever one of you is grieving, the face of your partner will be God’s face, full of comfort to you.

Whenever one of you is happy, the other will look on you with God’s own face, reflecting your joy, rejoicing with you.

You will be each the face of God to each other, always.”

You will be the face of God.

Father Leo’s message moved me deeply, and so I told him.

I told him it was one of the loveliest wedding homilies I’d heard.

And I tucked it into a corner of my mind, filed under ‘w’ for wedding, figuring I’d for sure want to quote him in future ceremonies.
But it didn’t stay tucked away for long.

Because what I’ve discovered, in these past couple weeks, is that I needed Father Leo’s words myself.

Here’s why:

In these weeks of witnessing terrible human hurt and suffering,
in this week of shocking grief and horror from Las Vegas,
I have found that Father Leo’s words are soul-sustaining, spirit-strengthening.

We can be the face of God to one another.

What lifts us through anything is believing, knowing,
that we, we humans, are not defined by our worst:
that we have the capacity, in the midst of *anything*, to be the face of God to one another.

And time and again, even when things go horribly wrong,
people do show that face to one another;
people truly **are** the face of God to one another.

In the midst of the horror last Sunday night,
there were those who were the face of God to others.
There was the young man who used his own body to shelter a woman who had fallen,
keeping her eyes focused on him and not what was happening around her.
He was surely, in that moment, the face of God to her.

Or Jonathan Smith,
the young father of three kids himself,
who kept shepherding others to safety,
going back again and again until he himself was shot —
he was most certainly the face of God to dozens;
and he himself was carried to safety by a policeman who placed his fingers in
Jonathan’s wounds to stop the bleeding.
That officer said this:

“nobody suffered alone. That’s what I will remember.
When people were dying, there was somebody there who was holding their hands
or holding them in their arms, comforting them.”

There **is** in humanity the capacity for great evil.
But much stronger, much brighter, and much more real
is the capacity we have to be the face of God to one another.
It is what we are created for.

Which is why on Monday morning,
the lines to give blood were around the block in Las Vegas:
nurses who arrived to open the doors at 7 a.m. found crowds already gathered,
people eager to be the face of God to another,
to be the presence of God in the only way they could be then.
To give, literally, of themselves
in a way that would show love and hope.
To be the face of God for someone else.

And on Wednesday evening, in a circle of candlelight,
I too saw the face of God.
A crowd had gathered together in downtown Fairfield,
candles in their hands,
to remember all those who were lost to the bullets that rained down in Las Vegas.
I was asked to pray,
and as I did, I looked out at the faces around me —
faces lit by the candles in front of them, tears glistening on cheeks.
All those folks — they were too far away from Nevada to give blood,
they couldn’t be there to comfort the wounded in the hospitals,
but still the faces I saw were the face of God turned toward the people who had
suffered,
contorted in sorrow, moved with compassion.

The scripture story that Leonard read to you just a little bit ago

is one of the oldest stories there is, thousands of years old.

It's the story of two people, two brothers, who have spent a lifetime — and many chapters of Genesis — in anger and bitter resentment.

Jacob and Esau, twins, had good reason for bitterness.

Decades before, they'd argued over dad's inheritance, and death threats had been exchanged,

and Jacob, who was no saint in this story, had left the country before his brother Esau could kill him.

A lot of ugliness here.

I didn't have Leonard read you those parts.

I wanted you to hear just the end of the story.

Jacob, old and gray, has decided it's time to go home, as terrifying as it is to think of seeing his angry brother.

And Esau hears that Jacob is on his way.

And he goes out to meet him.

It should be one of the nastiest encounters in the Bible.

But what happens is this:

as the two men approach each other,

Jacob doesn't know what else to do but to drop to his knees.

And Esau doesn't know what else to do but to run to him and throw his arms around him.

And when they finally unwrap their arms from each other, Jacob says this:

as powerful a line as there is in the Bible:

“Esau,” he says, “Esau, to see your face is like seeing the face of God, because you have received me with such kindness.”

Your kindness is the face of God to me.

How can **we** be the face of God to one another?

That way. Like that.

To be the presence of kindness to another **is** to be the face of God.

To be moved by compassion is to be the face of God.

To let grace overtake you, forgiveness flood you, is to be the face of God.

Like Jacob and Esau.

Like Jonathan Smith.

Like someone standing in a long line at the Red Cross.

Like a woman weeping by candlelight at a vigil for the lost.

Or the family I just read about in Puerto Rico,
 who have been taking all the rice they can get
 and cooking dinners for dozens of people who they know are worse off.
 They've been using gas that is precious right now
 in order to drive to a community even more decimated than their own
 to deliver the meals they've made.
 And they've been getting up the next day to do it again.
 Tirelessly, compassionately, being the face of God to those who are hungering.

And here's another.

Let me tell you a little story from right here, right now:

This past week, quietly and unassumingly,

a group of angels in our midst have been ministering to a family in need.

Far, far from all that is familiar,

and far, far from their country at war,

a refugee family is making their home in our community.

Let me say that differently: a home is being made for them.

Moved by compassion, and by God's call to welcome the stranger,
 these angels — who are people in this church, and in our very extended church
 community —

these angels have thrown themselves into the task of creating home
 for that family, for their kids.

They have carried furniture up flights of stairs,

set up rooms, bought appliances,

hauled a washer and dryer in.

They've brought in food, and showed them where to shop;

they've hugged them, and rejoiced with them.
All to let this family know, in the most real and tangible way,
that they are loved and they are welcome,
and that we are all family, one to another.

And I know, I *know*, that what those folks have shown this week is nothing less than
the face of God.

I know that in their compassionate welcome,
in their tireless caring, in all the work that has gone into creating home,
they have truly been the face of God to a family that needed God's presence.
What they have done has brought the ancient words of Jacob back to life:
“to see your face is like seeing the face of God,” he said —
“because you have received me with such kindness.”

And that they have done.
In their kindness, they have been the face of God.
And they have gladdened my heart.

I started this sermon by quoting the words of a priest on a wedding day,
reminding a young couple that their love for each other would enable them to be the
face of God to each other.

And I said that these words have stuck with me
because I have needed them to stick with me.
I said that there is something that is spirit-strengthening
about remembering our capacity to be the face of God to one another.

And I mean that.
There has been so much hurt around us that we are dizzied by it,
and so much that is beyond our ability to fathom or control.

But when we look *beyond* headlines,
we see the face of God in so many,
so many who are at work in this world for love,
so many who rise up in courage,

so many who live with compassion.

Let this be what strengthens our souls, what sustains our spirit.

Let this be our hope:

Remembering that we can be the face of God in this world.

We have that capacity, each one of us,

because we were made, each one of us, in the image of God,

made, each one of us, to be bearers of God's Spirit.

We have the capacity for heroism and for simply caring;

we are able to step forward in courage and also just to listen in love.

We weep at the things that make God weep,

and we rejoice with those who rejoice.

May we be inspired, may we be strengthened,

so to live that others will see in us the face of God —

again and again they will see the face of God. Amen.