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“He Made Himself Known”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a; 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

In his book, *Does Jesus Really Love Me?*, author Jeff Chu includes a vignette

about a young woman named Sarah,

who tells her “Joseph story” of *making herself known*,

and how fraught with uncertainty self-disclosure can be.

Having grown up in Oklahoma, in a religiously and politically conservative family,

Sarah, who had studied abroad in Italy,

and had worked at the Peace Corps headquarters in D.C.,

began to realize during her junior year in college,

that her values were becoming out of synch

with the conventional wisdom of her childhood and family.

She recalls, in particular, one kitchen table conversation with her parents

about the nature of marriage, in which her parents claimed

that proposed social changes not only were illegal,

but also ran counter to the biblical witness, which amounted to heresy for them;

and, that in their opinion, had the explosive potential

to destroy American society as we know it.

Sarah knew then that when the time came for her *to make herself known*,
that she would have difficulty getting the words out.

"I just don't think I can tell you things sometimes," she said to her father.

"Like what?" he asked. "Sarah, are you pregnant?"

"No Dad," she replied with a sigh. "But *I am a liberal!*"

This revelation was only a testing of the waters, however.

A few months later, Sarah decided to wade in a little deeper with her parents.

"I have something else to tell you," she said uncomfortably.

She then handed them a note confessing that she was gay.

They read it. Then they reread it. And then they read it again.

"I wanted to die," recalls Sarah, sitting on the couch across from them.

Finally, after a long silence, her father said, "I think we were afraid of this."

(Chu, Jeff. *Does Jesus Really Love Me?* pp. 74-75)

What a frightening thing that is, to *make yourself known* to your family or friends;

to reveal your true identity to those who think they know you best.

How will they respond to me, you wonder?

Will they accept me as a human being, as a child of God?

Or will they turn away, reject me, shame me, or shun me?

And if they do accept me, will they dream the same dream they would dream

for any person, dreams of love and affection?

Or will they shut down their dreams and see me only as a shadow,
whose inner life means nothing to them?

God claims to know me from the inside out: to know when I rise,
to perceive my thoughts from afar, to know every word that is on my tongue,
to be familiar with all of my ways, even to know the days ordained for me.

(Psalm 139)

If God knows and loves me so completely, as Psalm 139 claims,
why is it often so difficult for others to know me, the real me,
and love and accept me completely, as well?

Sarah's story actually turns out relatively well.

She remained at the conservative Christian college she attended;
she managed to keep the faith instilled by her family;
and she was surprised to find her father to be an unexpected
source of wisdom as she tried to figure out *her place* in the faith.

"When I see someone hurting, I ask God to be with them" she says.

"I don't know if that will happen, but I hope it will.

I've always known God was there....

My faith gives me a reason to love and to serve....to be a better person...

I just need a place...and a group of people who love and respect (me) you
no matter what, and who are willing to have dialogue
even when (we) you disagree," she said.

(Chu, Jeff. *Does Jesus Really Love Me?* p. 91)

When I was at Kenyon College recently, attending an interfaith writers' conference,
a woman, I'll call her Alice, *made herself known* to us,
although she certainly was not required or expected
to make any such self-disclosure.

As we were going around the circle and introducing ourselves
to the members of our small writing group,

Alice revealed that she had been part of the very first co-ed class at Kenyon,
as they opened their doors to women in the late 60's.

However, she added, the stress of being one of only a few female students on campus,
followed by the terrible killing of four students by the National Guard
at Kent State University just down the road in 1970,
was simply more than she could bear.

And she had dropped out of Kenyon before completing her freshman year.

"It was just too traumatic to be in this place at that time," she said.

I have thought about Alice this week, as our freshmen and upper-classpersons
are arriving on college campuses during these very volatile days of racial unrest.

What a frightening thing it is to *make yourself known* to others.

How will the members of the group respond to me, you wonder?

Will they think I'm less educated, less smart, because I had to drop out of college?

Will they think I'm weak, emotionally weak,

because I could not take the stress of coed living,

or separate myself from a tragic event that happened 107 miles away?

Will they treat me differently than they treat other members of the group,

or hear me differently, or read me differently because of my truth?
If Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,
will others love and accept me in the same way? Yes!

Alice's story actually ends well, too.

As it turns out, she returned home after dropping out,
took courses at a local college to fulfill her freshman requirements,
returned to Kenyon at a later time, and was able to graduate with her class.
Her story had a remarkable ending, and we found Alice to be a remarkably
resilient person once we knew all the details of her story.

Ah, Joseph, you dreamer-weaver and object of your father Jacob's favor;
you coat-wearer and victim of your brothers' envy;
yours is a double disclosure:
first, a revelation of your Hebrew identity and familial ties to your brothers;
then, an epiphany of the hidden hand of God in your family's life,
that you had failed to notice, until *such a time as this*.
And both, or the combination of both of these unveilings, drive you to tears,
because the knowing is of such poignancy and of such intensity,
and the human knowledge and God awareness
too wonderful for you to contain.

So, you clear the room of all Egyptians to make your gospel disclosure to your family:
I am Joseph. I am your brother, the one you sold into slavery.

I am the one whom you presumed dead, but who is alive.

The terrified silence of the brothers in response to this first disclosure is not unlike that of the women who visit the tomb of Jesus, only to find it empty.

“Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled the tomb.

They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid,”

Mark’s gospel states. (Mark 16:8)

Your brothers, Joseph, cower in silence, while you sob so loudly

that the whole Egyptian household hears your moment of truth-telling.

The contrast could not be greater!

The one whom they thought was dead, is alive again; the one thought

to be lost has been found; and this prodigal family has been reunited.

This is your first revelation, Joseph, and the climax of your narrative.

But your second revelation is even more profound, and it catches even you, Joseph,

off guard: this epiphany that God’s providential hand

has been guiding your family since the beginning;

this epiphany that your dream of old was *of God*,

and that it has had its way with you and yours after all these years.

Unlike your brothers, you have no difficulty in getting your words out, Joseph;

they practically tumble from your lips in triple time:

God sent me to preserve life, to save lives;

God sent me before you to preserve you for a remnant;

It was not you who sent me here, but *God*.

Each time, it is *God* who is the subject of your disclosure, and

you, who are the object of God's sending.

Two "I am's" predominate in this poignant reunion:

the *I am* of Joseph's true Hebrew familial identity,

and the *I am* of God's true saving and forgiving identity.

And while you have been aware of the first, Joseph, for some time;

you totally were unaware of the second, until *this point of grace*,

when the curtain was lifted to reveal

the hidden presence of God in all of your comings and goings.

The magnitude of these revelations is overwhelming, and you boo-hoo

at the beginning, as you *make yourself known* to your family,

the ones who thought they knew you best.

And you cry at the culmination of the reunion, as God makes God's self known to you.

And you fall on your brother's neck and embrace everyone,

and weep like the prodigal's father,

rejoicing in the hidden mercy of Yahweh God.

Do you have a Joseph story, of risky self-disclosure that opens the way forward

to a new future for you and the ones you love?

These disclosures are often difficult to put into words, and sometimes they do not turn

out so well, initially. And often they can be very frightening and painful.

I was particularly moved this week by the Joseph story of the two sisters,

Tadrin and Micah Washington from Charlottesville,

who were only trying to take a shortcut home Saturday a week ago,

when they found their Toyota Camry wedged and trapped in the heated confrontation between the white supremacists and counter-protestors there. Traffic was gridlocked, and they were unable to move forward or backwards, surrounded by a swirl of people, when that rogue terrorist car driven by James Alex Fields careened into the back of their car. And the sister driving, Tadrin, said her head hit the steering wheel so hard, that it was difficult to tell if what was happening was real, or a dream. She could hear people screaming, she said, and could see people lying hurt, while her sister could see Heather Heyer, down, near the rear of the car. But the words of her later epiphany come straight out of the Joseph tradition of Israel's experience of God, and God's people. "God put us there," Tadrin said through *her own tears of providential revelation*. "God put us there to save other lives. My car stopped most of the impact. If we had not been there, he (the driver) would have plowed into the crowd and killed more people." (CNN video, 8/23/17)

He made himself known. I don't want to say that God is a "he", but I do want to suggest that God sometimes reveals Godself in the most heinous of human situations, the cross being the prime example, which gives me hope, actually, in our current atmosphere of civil unrest. And as difficult as it is sometimes to confront and confess our true humanity, thus making room for God to be a divine and guiding presence in our lives;

frankly, I think the more difficult revelation to discern, to disclose and to voice
even to those who think they know us best, just might be *our confession of God*;
how God has been the hidden subject of our story-line, not the object;
and how God has been the hidden, but active agent in our lives all along
as the knowing, guiding, sending, providing and gracing One.

Let us pray:

Abba God, you know our hearts and minds; you hear and know our cries; you understand our needs. We patiently wait for the bounty of your generous and glorious hand to be opened before us. In this we pray. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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