

STEWARDS OF THE MYSTERIES OF OUR GOD

I Corinthians 4: 1-5

Pilgrim Congregational Church

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Elizabeth Oettinger

Whenever I see my mother, whether I go visit her in California or she comes to see me, there is a ritual we follow. We take an afternoon, and first we go out to lunch and then we go shopping. I watch her try on clothes; she watches me try on clothes; we each buy something. She buys something for me. I guess because I'm the daughter and she's the mother, I don't buy anything for her. Ever since I have lived away from home we have had this standing date whenever we are together. And to some, it might seem silly, or frivolous, at best irrelevant. But that's just not true. There is something profound and symbolic in those afternoons together, because they happen regardless of how my mother and I are feeling about each other on any particular visit. Through good times and bad times, the times I didn't like my mother and the times she didn't like me, when relationship was strong and when relationship was a fragile strand of history between us, we have gone out to lunch and then gone shopping. And that afternoon together is our way, in all times and circumstances, of letting each other know that we treasure the mystery of our relationship. That though the conversation may be wonderful or heated or move along carefully guarded superficialities, we are mother and daughter, and there is more between us than merely how we interact in any point in history. We will always see ourselves in each other's faces; we will have a past and a future. Some will call it trivial; some will call my defense of our afternoons together rationalization and hocus-pokus. I know I cannot touch the reality which supports them. But I know also that I would not miss them. And I know that in the past, in more painful times, when I could not embrace my mother herself, I could participate in the ritual and that would tell her what I could not say in words: that I still treasured her, and all that binds us together, that I acknowledge that there is more between us than is visible, and I affirm not necessarily our day to day interactions, but the larger thing, the mystery of relationship spun out between us.

It is so hard to find a way to talk about mystery, about those things which we know and feel to be true but cannot nail down, cannot touch. I remember a friend, Joan O'Shea, telling me once that the sign of real maturity was to accept and to rejoice in the mysteries of life rather than trying to deny them, or worse, to prove them. Mysteries are not detective stories where if you are smart enough or lucky enough, you will stumble onto the clues which bring you the right answer. Mystery is the sunlight on the wall, the creative vision at 2 a.m., the intuition which brings you to the house of a friend just as you are needed. You cannot touch it; you cannot name it; you see it for a moment and then it is gone, leaving no trace, no clue, no way to prove that it was ever there.

To be mature is to accept and to rejoice in the mysteries which surround us. I thought of my friend's words as I read this morning's lesson from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, where he says that we should regard ourselves as both servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Now in this church we talk a lot about being servants of Christ. We may not do a very good job of it all the time, and we may disagree as to the proper way of carrying out our servanthood. But I think that basically we understand the concept. We educate ourselves on issues; we give ourselves to projects of service. That part of our faith we are at least comfortable with.

But in Paul's words, that is only half of what we should be doing in the church. We should be servants of Christ, yes, but we are also called to be stewards of the mysteries of God. I love that phrase. Rather than preach about it, I sort of want to just stand and admire it, "stewards of the mysteries of God." In the Protestant tradition, especially in the Congregational Church, I think that we are largely immature in this aspect of our faith. We are not comfortable with the mysteries of God. We do not know how to support them, how to treasure them. We are afraid that if we affirm them we will be seen as superstitious, that we will be participating

in the worst sort of hocus-pocus, which is religious hocus-pocus. A few weeks ago I came together with a group of people to pray for one who was sick. That rarely happens in our church, in our tradition, that we would come together informally to pray in a time of crisis. But it happened this night, and ten of us took each other's hands and were quiet and prayed, and some spoke aloud, and then we parted from each other and went our separate ways. "What would you do that for?" asked a friend. "Didn't you feel sort of silly? Weren't you self-conscious? What did you think would happen?" How do you explain? It's like explaining my afternoons with my mother. What you see is not all there is, and yes, there were moments of self-consciousness, and no, I don't know what I expected to happen; but beyond all that present interaction, I also know that in that moment, that group of people were doing their best to faithfully be stewards of the mysteries of their God. Despite unease and questions unanswered, we affirmed and rejoiced in that mystery rather than trying to deny it or prove it. We were all changed and supported by that encounter, though I cannot tell you how or why. Only that it exists: like the patch of sunlight on my wall and my visions of 2 a.m., and the intuition which has brought me more than once to the house of a friend when I was needed.

One more image which I would hold up for you, because I don't think you can teach about mystery, only tell stories about it, or draw images, hear it, smell it, taste it, sense it. That's why I am glad we had the cantata this morning. If we are to become more faithful stewards of the mysteries of God, then we must train ourselves, give ourselves permission, if you will, to experience God, experience the mystery of God's presence and holiness, in ways other than spoken words; in silence, in music, in movement, in patterns of light and darkness.

One more image for you this morning. When I hear that phrase, "the mysteries of God," there is a picture which springs unasked for in my mind, a picture from my childhood, of that time in the Episcopal communion service where the priest, just having consecrated the bread and wine, lifts them up over his or her head so that all may see them, and the chimes ring, and the church is filled with an awful stillness. There are some who say that communion is the ultimate hocus-pocus; others who see in its words and rhythms and symbols the ultimate expression of the mysteries of God. I know that for years I was ashamed and a little embarrassed by the meaning I found in the communion image, a meaning I still carry with me and connect with whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion, in high church terms, the Eucharist, from the Greek "eucharisto" - the giving thanks to God for the mystery of our relationship. For years I was embarrassed to be so moved by that which I could not explain. But in this passage from Corinthians, I find a rationale not to be embarrassed, but in fact to treasure that image, to protect it, for as well as being a servant of Christ, I am called to be a steward of that image, that I might affirm and rejoice in the mysteries of God.

Now I do not expect you to share in the meaning that I find in my image; I hope, however, that hearing of the mysteries of God evokes in you your own image, one that you have maybe been embarrassed by for years, because you could not explain it, and because it touched your soul. And the liberating word from Paul this morning is to quit being embarrassed; to treasure it. For as much as being servants of Christ, we are all called to be stewards of the mysteries of our God, those things which we cannot explain, but which we know are real, like the more that lies behind family rituals, like the sunlight on my wall, and 2:00 a.m. visions. We are called to mature faith, a faith which moves beyond denial and proof, and is able to celebrate and rejoice in the many and wonderful mysteries of our God.

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