

Becoming Real

It's probably safe to say that the people I am most likely to snap at, or be harsh with, or impatient with, turn out to be the people I love the most. On days like today, all of us together, dressed in our Sunday best, we will most often be polite, well-mannered and kind.

It is a fact of life that we are most truly who we really are with those closest to us; and most on our guard with the rest of the world. And it is that fact of life that Jesus is holding up to the light today, and examining, and asking us to examine as well.

He does it by telling us the story of a widow. Probably an old woman. Widows had no rights. Any land a husband may have owned went not to the wife, but to the dead man's brother.

Widows had no social security, no inheritance rights; they were very vulnerable, very exposed.

And because of her lot in life, the widow in today's parable lets it all hang out. She's mad, she's persistent, she's determined. No frilly dress and soft words here. She is in the face of this judge all day long.

The literal Greek, when we hear the judge say: "I'll give her what she wants so she may not wear me out by continually coming," well, the literal translation has more of a punch to it.

Literally!

It is this:

"I'll give her what she wants so she may not finally come and slap me in the face!"

That's the exact translation!

When it comes to the ultimate issues in life, when we get right to it, we are each of us the widow; utterly dependent on God. Just ask any totally independent guy or gal who just got the cancer diagnosis; or whose 30-year career just ended with a pink slip; or the mom who's 10 year old lies dying of a brain tumor.

No matter your station in life, or mine, when you get to it, we are each of us the widow; utterly dependent, utterly in need.

Dependence is often something we experience only with those closest to us. Perhaps in some ways it's that dependence that allows us to be snappy or irritable with each other; to be who we really are.

I think what Jesus is encouraging us to today is to treat our relationship with God like we do our most intimate family and friends; and in doing so, to come face to face with our own vulnerability, our own lack of security, our own need.

That means not only sharing with God our deepest selves, our dreams, our longings, our hopes; but it means also learning to be real with God. And sometimes being real means getting mad, or irritated or angry or sullen, or just plain confused.

Jesus calls God "Abba." Jesus invites us to call God "Abba."
"Abba" translates as "Dad" or "Daddy". Today's parable challenges us to get our relationship with God, with dad, off the pedestal.

The parable challenges us to let God in, not just in our Sunday best, but at our Monday worst as well. This is a parable that gives permission: permission to yell at God, to be disappointed in God, to be angry with God.

Today, Jesus gives us permission to be real in our love affair with God.

So, you may ask: "What is real?"

That question perhaps has one of its best answers in a little children's book; a little children's book called the Velveteen Rabbit. It's the story of a stuffed bunny given as a present to a little boy: a stuffed bunny that longs to be real.

Thrown into the closet one day, he has a conversation with the old rocking horse about how one becomes real. Allow me...

"The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any of the others. He was so old that his brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath, and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces. He was wise, for he had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and swagger, and by and by, break their mainsprings and pass away, and he knew that they were only toys, and would never turn into anything else. For nursery magic is very strange and wonderful, and only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse understand all about it.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day.... "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you or a stick-out handle? "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become REAL."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes" said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept."

"Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real, you can't be ugly, except to those who don't understand."

"I suppose you are Real?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled."

Whether it is an angry widow, ready to slap the face of a corrupt judge; or a stuffed bunny longing to become, God beckons us to come to grips with who God longs to be in our lives.

In Jesus, the promise from Jeremiah, the promise that God is a God who loves us more than we can know; that promise is now complete. "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

Today, meet God right where you are; for that it always where God is ready to meet you.

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