

Angels Coming and Going
By Bill Lawson

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Today is Human Relations Day in The United Methodist Church, and tomorrow is the national observance of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. Human Relations Day is celebrated annually across our denomination on the Sunday before King's observance. The UMC website says, "Human Relations Day calls United Methodists to recognize the right of all God's children in realizing their potential as human beings in relationship with one another."¹ Similarly, our mission statement here at Briensburg United Methodist Church is "Helping each other serve to our full potential."

Just think how the world would be if everyone could feel the love and friendship, the mutual respect and supportiveness, and the sense of community we share in this room today. Many communities around the world already do feel this way about each other, and they do extend this love into all their other relationships. But there are still many others who feel differently and extend their animosities into all their relationships. Part of our work as believers in the teachings and example of Jesus is to overcome their hostility with our love – with God's love. St. John framed it metaphorically at the beginning of his Gospel in the Good News Translation, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out."²

I'd like to share this from The King Center Website:³

Martin Luther King, Jr. described the "Beloved Community" as a society where "caring and compassion drive political policies that support the worldwide elimination of poverty and hunger and all forms of bigotry and violence. At its core, the 'Beloved Community' is an engine of reconciliation."

There is a lot of angelic activity going on all around us.

And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man. (*John 1:51 KJV*)

The presence of angels among us is one of the most ecumenical beliefs shared by humans -- not as ecumenical as prayer, not even close to that, but like prayer, most people give each other a lot of latitude. The word translated *angel* throughout the New Testament, and similarly throughout the Old Testament, is defined by the *Lexicon* as "a messenger, envoy, one who is sent, a messenger from God."⁴ The term *angel* in the Bible refers chiefly to incorporeal spirits who, at times, take human form but is also generally used by people of various religious persuasions in reference to other people who take on the helpful, supportive nature of angels.

We're used to hearing about the angels associated with the Nativity stories. They also figure prominently in the Genesis legends. Usually, the Bible stories tell about angels who have been sent to people, but in Revelation, John was instructed in his vision to write letters to each of the angels of seven churches. In a similar spirit to seeing Christ in others, Hebrews reminds us to

Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.⁵

Jesus alluded to a story that was very familiar to Nathaneal, as it is to most Christians, and has

been part of our current Wednesday online Bible discussions. It's the story we just sang about, the story of Jacob's Ladder. While Jacob was traveling one night, he slept on the ground with a stone for his pillow. As he slept, he had a vision of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven. Angels were "ascending and descending" on the ladder. As the dream continued, God spoke to Jacob and promised to grant the land where he was sleeping to Jacob and his posterity. On waking, Jacob remarked, "Surely the Lord is in this place."⁶

There are no reports of Nathaneal or anyone else seeing such a vision in the New Testament. Jesus used the legend of Jacob's Ladder as an allegory for the angelic nature of everything he and his followers would be doing "hereafter," as it says in the King James Version. The mission of Christ and the Church continues to this hour, so we are included in the *hereafter* of that allegory. Think of all the wonderful things God is empowering people to do in the world today! In the midst of all the challenges and heartaches of life, people are stepping up every day in ways that blur the lines between literal and figurative angels.

We are invited to listen to what God is communicating.

And the Lord came and stood, and called as at other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel answered, Speak; for thy servant heareth. (*1 Samuel 3:10 KJV*)

Nancy Varden, our District Superintendent, opened our clergy meeting this week with a quote from Psalm 95, "Today if ye will hear [God's] voice, harden not your heart."⁷ As she repeated this quote several times, I was struck by the conditional nature of the invitation: *if ye will hear... if you will or if you won't... if you do or if you don't...* But, *if you will and if you do hear God's voice, then harden not your heart.* So, as she spoke, I felt myself making that commitment that if I were to hear God's voice that day, I would not harden my heart. I can't say that I did hear God's voice that day, but then I can't really say that I didn't either. Throughout the morning of fellowship with the other clergy of our district, our conversations, and sharing of the Sacrament together, I do feel I received several distinct impressions that are still working their way through my somewhat receptive / somewhat obstinate heart. So, whether I did or whether I didn't, I do seem to have been hearing it. And to at least some degree, I might be able to say with Samuel in the New Revised Standard Version, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."⁸

God knows us thoroughly and loves us completely.

Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. (*Psalm 139:3 KJV*)

God is all around us, within us, and among us. God knows all about us and loves us not just in spite of who we are but *because* of who we are. One of the key characteristics Jesus attributed to Nathanael in today's Gospel reading was his honesty, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!"⁹ As the psalmist points out, God is well acquainted with all our ways, for better or for worse. Jesus told Nicodemus that he did not come "into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved."¹⁰

God loves us and everyone else unconditionally and expects us all to reflect that universal love in all our relationships. We are invited to constant self-examination and renewal. We can trust God enough to be honest with ourselves in God's presence, knowing that God already is well aware of who we are (perhaps even more so than we are of ourselves). The point of

confession is not humiliation but redemption. We can discover within ourselves where we can make improvements so we can be happier and be more of a blessing to others.

Every person is a sacred space.

What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? (*1 Corinthians 6:19 KJV*)

Even though this verse is part of a passage warning against promiscuity, the idea of the body and of our lives, separately and collectively, as a temple is a recurring theme in Paul's letters in a variety of other contexts. The same theme is consistent with Jesus' perspective when he said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Some thought he meant the stone building in Jerusalem, but the Bible explains, "he spake of the temple of his body."¹¹

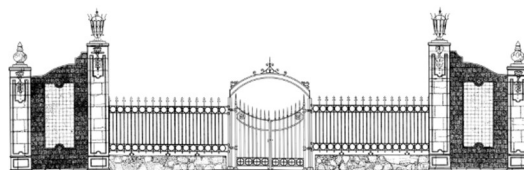
Some people-- maybe a lot of people actually—think Jesus called his body a temple because he was God's son and that Christians should properly think only of themselves as temples of the Holy Spirit – and, of course, with whatever stipulations their particular opinions impose with that. But that is a far too narrow view. Every person is a temple of God's spirit. According to the creation narratives at the beginning of the Bible, we all are created in the image and animated by the breath – this is the spirit – of our Creator. We cannot fully perceive *ourselves* as the temple of the Holy Spirit apart from seeing *each other and everyone else* as the temple of God.

This is another of those ideas, like prayer and angels, that it would be good for everyone to give each other latitude on. The concept is not limited to Christianity. Many other world religions also illuminate the sense of every human body as a sanctuary. Just think, even with all our different beliefs and practices, cultures and lifestyles, how the world would be if everyone everywhere could all see each other as a sacred shrine!

Conclusion

Human Relations Day emphasizes the value and potential of every human being. Jesus did that. In his allegory of the Judgement of the Nations, "when the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him," Jesus specifically targeted the way people treat each other across governments, societies, and institutions in addition to individuals. The messages of people like Martin Luther King, Jr. challenge us all to listen to our own better angels, to be thoughtful about our unseen environment, and to treat everyone as spiritual beings like Christ or like angels, or like divinely created souls whose bodies are temples of the Holy Ghost.

In the Name of Jesus, Amen.



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Manuscript of the sermon preached by Rev. Bill Lawson

January 14, 2024, at Briensburg UMC

Bible Readings for the 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany, Revised Common Lectionary

Psalms 139:1-6, 1 Samuel 3:1-10, 1 Corinthians 6:17-20, John 1:43-51

Acknowledgments

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Notes

¹ The United Methodist Church. "Human Relations Day FAQ," 2014. *United Methodist Communications*. www.umc.org/en/content/human-relations-day-faq Accessed 14 January 2024.

² John 18:5 (GNT).

³ The King Center. "Beloved Community Teach-In," 2014. *The King Center*. thekingcenter.org/what-we-do/beloved-community-teach-in/ Accessed 14 January 2024.

⁴ Thayer and Smith. "Greek Lexicon entry for Aggelos." *The KJV New Testament Greek Lexicon*. www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/aggelos.html 14 January 2024.

⁵ Hebrews 13:1-2 (KJV).

⁶ Genesis 28:11-16 (KJV).

⁷ Psalm 95:7-8 (KJV).

⁸ 1 Samuel 3:10 (NRSV).

⁹ John 1:47 (KJV).

¹⁰ John 3:17 (KJV).

¹¹ John 2:19, 21 (KJV).

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