

REFLECTION

March 14, 2021

The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson

John 3:14

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

Is there any better picture or metaphor that captures what life has been like for many of us, most of us, for the past year, than the tiny little zoom boxes and the gallery of faces locked behind computer screens that has characterized living with COVID-19, during this world-wide pandemic? Tiny little boxes reminding us of our confinement and isolation. Separated even from our families and closest friends. Lock-down. That’s what it was called. We have all experienced it. The word that comes to mind that describes our experience in spiritual terms is *diminutive*. Diminutive. *Extremely or extraordinarily small*. So tiny as to be almost invisible. Non-existent. We’ve been living small, extremely small. And maybe, just maybe, we’ve gotten too accustomed to thinking and living diminutively. Getting in the habit of living and thinking diminutively can be dangerous for the soul. And debilitating for the spirit.

Last week during Bible Study we looked at the Gospel lesson appointed for today. John 3:16. It is perhaps one of the best-known verses in the Bible.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only
begotten son, that whosoever believes in him,
should not perish but have everlasting life.*

It sounds so beautiful. But this verse has been misinterpreted, misunderstood, misused—and diminished in its true spiritual power—It has become diminutive—dangerous for the soul and for the Church when it is understood to limit the expansive vision of God’s grace and love! In the Christian classic *“Your God is Too Small,”* J.B. Phillips details the many damaging small conceptions people have of the Divine. *“Too many of us,”* says J.B. Phillips, *“are crippled by a limited idea of God.”* Sometimes we can hardly get past the image of God *as an overworked customer service representative* and wonder how God can possibly handle all of the requests and needs. This is what diminutive thinking looks

like. And it is damaging because it gives rise to plaintive cries of abandonment —feelings of isolation, and disappointment. It gives rise to feelings of being unworthy of God’s attention, and doubt concerning God’s loving kindness and passion for justice. The result? Some feel—*God seems to be dismissing me. My prayer are not answered but ignored and disregarded. It feels unjust, unfair, and unwarranted.* What is missing is not God but the bigger picture and understanding.

I am reminded of a theology professor with whom I studied. He challenged the young atheists in his classes by asking them to tell him about the God they *didn’t* believe in. He would listen carefully, attentively, respectfully and then conclude honestly, *“I don’t believe in that God either.”* Likewise, even Reformer, Martin Luther, accused 15th-16th century Christian scholar, Erasmus *“Your thoughts of God are too human.”* Diminutive thinking can be a withering sickness that ultimately destroys faith.

Not so, the Gospel of John. Without getting into how and why, John 3:16 has been misinterpreted in a framework of Heaven & Hell. Let’s just look at the words themselves, originally written in *koine* or common Greek. *For God so love the world.* Surprise! The word for “world” is *cosmos*. God’s love encompasses all that God created— the cosmos! For starters, God’s sovereignty and love and power is expansive. It includes all that is— and more. God’s presence in the cosmos is captured in metaphor when God challenges Job to think bigger!

*“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements –
surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were
its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars
sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”*

(Job 38:4-7):

In this poetic account of creation, God is the one who does the creating, not Job, not us, back when “the morning stars sang together.” It’s fun to read how scientists have found that each star emits a radio signal that identifies it from all other stars. It is as if the stars really do sing! NASA’s Elizabeth Landau writes,

“We can’t hear it with our ears, but the stars in the sky are performing a concert, one that never stops. The biggest stars make the lowest, deepest sounds, like tubas and double basses. Small stars have high-pitched voices, like celestial flutes. These virtuosos don’t just play one ‘note’ at a time, either — our own Sun has thousands of different sound waves bouncing around inside it at any given moment.”

All that power, all that majesty, all that wonder. But how does this help you and me directly—who struggle with the daily circumstances of our lives? Some would say that you need only glimpse the majesty of God to be comforted and sustained.

*Knowing this brings strength and vitality.
It is not strength in ourselves that is encouraged here
but strength in Him—in the sovereign, all-powerful, all-wise,
all-sustaining, never-tiring God.
Are you weary? Losing faith in God’s promises? Tired in the heat
of the battle? Overwhelmed by the opposition? Then what you
need is a fresh glimpse of the majesty of God. Sometimes,
we cannot see what is right before us and above us.*

This doesn’t quite do it for me. That’s when the words of John become even more beautiful and more expansive and more life-saving.

*[God} gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him
may not perish but may have eternal life.*

Let's not think too small here, either. In these words in *koine* Greek *to believe* is not to sign on to a set of statements about Jesus—to grant admission to an afterlife (There's that dangerous Heaven & Hell framework again!) but *believe* means *to belove*—to give one's heart, loyalty, fidelity, and commitment to Jesus. *Beloving* means to love and be loved by God as he *loves us in Jesus*. Eternal life is a transformed life, a new life, a consequence of that love—*here and now*... and without end.

Need a translator? Julian of Norwich—a spiritual guide of the 14th century offers an explanation for us now, just as she did for those during the Black Plague pandemic of her time and place; Using a smallest bit of creation to point to an expansive and loving vision of God, she held a hazelnut in the palm of her hand. “*Everything you need to know about creation,*” she said, “*can be seen in this small hazelnut. God created it. God loves it. And, God keeps it.*”

The whole *cosmos* is in God's hands. Hands we learned to recognize in the life of Jesus. Even the smallest of us, the isolated, the most frightened and scared of us, the almost invisible of us, is loved and kept in the expansive heart and mind of God in Christ.

AMEN.