

A Sermon by the Reverend John S. McDuffie
Christmas Day
Wednesday, December 25, 2019

Isaiah 52:7-10

Psalm 98

Hebrews 1:1-4

John 1:1-14

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, he gave power to become the children of God, even to them that believe on his name.

It is the morning of Christ's nativity. The angels who brightened the night sky and sang "Gloria in excelsis Deo" have gone back into heaven. The shepherds who were summoned from the fields to go and see the thing that had taken place in Bethlehem, have now returned to their flocks. (Well, we presume they have returned to their flocks. Frankly, I always find myself worrying about the sheep that they suddenly left behind on that special night.) And we, like Mary, treasure these things in our hearts on this morning, and ponder what God has done, and is doing, for humanity in the birth of this tiny child.

As I thought about what I wanted to say to you on this Christmas morning, I was reminded of a favorite Broadway musical of mine, which is Man of La Mancha. For decades I had ignored this musical, even though I had twice read Don Quixote, the novel that is the basis for the musical; and even though I knew well its most popular song, "The Impossible Dream." It was only after seeing a production of Man of La Mancha several years ago at the Shakespeare Theater here in Washington, that I absolutely fell in love with it!

I think most of you know the outline of the story. Alonso Quixano, an elderly man who lives in a village in central Spain, is fond of reading books about knighthood and chivalry. One day, on the hottest day of the summer, he apparently goes stark raving mad and imagines himself to be a knight-errant, Don Quixote, sent on a mission to combat the evils of the world. He summons a villager named Sancho Panza to be his squire. He dons a rusty old suit of armor, and mounts his nag of a horse named Rocinante, and he and Sancho ride off on their quest.

Like every worthy knight, Don Quixote must have a lady, whom he loves and to whom he dedicates himself and his endeavors. In his fevered imagination he comes up with a construct: a beautiful woman named Lady Dulcinea del Toboso. In the novel, Don Quixote never has a direct encounter with Dulcinea, but Sancho knows the woman whom he has esteemed so highly. Her name is Aldonza; she is a homely peasant girl, a pig keeper and sometime prostitute.

In the musical, however, Don Quixote's direct relationship with Dulcinea becomes a principal theme in the story. He encounters her at an inn, which he visits and believes to be a knight's castle. Aldonza works at the inn and is a scullery maid and more-than-sometime prostitute, who is scorned and mocked and belittled by those who frequent the inn. But when Don Quixote sees her, he is in a transport of rapture—this is the beloved Dulcinea! He sings a beautiful love song,

with the refrain, “Dulcinea, Dulcinea, I see heaven when I see thee, Dulcinea! And thy name is like a prayer an angel whispers...Dulcinea, Dulcinea.” The clients at the inn who hear this song immediately mock Aldonza, and the singer of the song. Aldonza is completely befuddled and bemused. What does this stranger want of her? She tries to turn away from him, but he persists in calling her Dulcinea. “My name is Aldonza”, she scornfully replies. “But thou art my lady, Dulcinea!”, he continues. “I am no lady!”, she angrily retorts, and sings a song in which she tells of being abandoned by her mother at birth, and scorned and neglected by her father. She speaks of all her relationships, which are marked by animosity. “I was born on a dung heap, and I’ll die on a dung heap,” she exclaims.

But Don Quixote persists in giving her a new name, and conferring upon her a new identity and a new life. Only gradually does Aldonza realize that this man has elevated her to an extraordinary place of dignity. At the end of the musical, Don Quixote is once again Alonso Quixano. His relatives have apprehended him and have spirited him home, and have convinced him that he was living with a mad delusion. As the impossible dream begins to die, Alonso Quixano is now dying as well. But Aldonza shows up at his bedside where he lies, near death. “Come closer, girl”, he says weakly, as she enters the room. “Don’t you know me?” she asks. “No, we haven’t ever met”, he replies. “I am Aldonza”, she says. “I don’t know anyone by that name,” he says, “although perhaps I did once. You must forgive me, I have been ill and plagued by many shadows.” “Oh, try to remember, my Lord!” she desperately cries. “I am not a Lord”, he says. “But you are my Lord!”, she exclaims. “Once you spoke to me. You gave me a new name, and it changed my life.” And she sings a tender reprise of the love song he once sang to her: “Dulcinea, Dulcinea, once you met a girl and called her Dulcinea...and the name was like a prayer an angel whispers....Dulcinea, Dulcinea.”

Aldonza briefly helps Alonso to remember who he was, and is –Don Quixote, the knight errant, dreaming the impossible dream, fighting the unbeatable foe, bearing unbearable sorrow, running where the brave dare not go... As Alonso dies, Sancho pours out his grief. “My master is dead!” he says. “Don Quixote is not dead”, Aldonza says resolutely. As Sancho then addresses her as Aldonza, she says, “My name is Dulcinea!”

I think of this story this morning, because what Don Quixote did for Aldonza is what the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ has done for all of us. By coming into this world, Christ has gathered into one things earthly and heavenly, and he has elevated all of us who receive him into an extraordinary place of dignity!

Step back for a moment and let your cynical, skeptical heart ask the question, “Why would God want to enter human flesh? Why would God want to dwell among us, in this broken world? Is this a kind of divine madness on God’s part? In his book Heart of the World the Swiss theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar writes of the descending God, coming to earth and not finding a cordial “Welcome!” sign, but finding instead gaping, ravening jaws with sharpened teeth waiting for him. We see the word “world” often in the gospel of John. Biblical scholar Walter Wink suggested that we translate the Greek word “cosmos” not as “world”, but instead as “domination system”. Wink says the domination system is marked by endless competition, exploitation, conflict, distrust, ridicule, insult, and demeaning behavior. This is what God suddenly happens into in the birth of a tiny child. And that is the miracle—that the Word

became flesh, and came to live in your neighborhood. And the Word speaks to the world, and says to every human heart, “You are better than this! You can have a new life. You can be the beloved children of God!” W.H. Auden expressed it poetically at the end of his long Christmas oratorio For the Time Being: “...Remembering the stable, where for once in our lives everything became a You and nothing was an it.” Auden sadly sees that we will soon forget who we truly are, and to whom we truly belong. But if we can remember our true identity as God’s beloved children, then we can share this identity and blessing with others.

Some time ago the late Henri Nouwen gave a series of talks at the old Crystal Cathedral in Orange County, California. Nouwen was a Dutch-born Roman Catholic priest and was one of the great spiritual writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This series was called “The Life of the Beloved” and I commend it to you for your viewing on YouTube. At the time of the talks Nouwen was living at the L’Arche community in Toronto. L’Arche is an international network of residences founded by Jean Vanier, who entered into eternal life during this past year. L’Arche is dedicated to housing mentally and physically handicapped adult men and women, and loving them and giving them lives of dignity and respect.

Nouwen begins his talks by saying that all of us from time to time ask ourselves an important question: “Who am I?” And he says that we typically answer the question in one, or both of two ways: (1) I am what I do—my occupation or profession, the way that I principally spend my time defines who I am; (2) I am what I have—my degrees on the wall, my house, my automobile, my possessions, my level of income, etc. But Nouwen tells us that if we strip away the masks we wear and the games we play, then we find our true identity—we are the beloved children of God. And if we can come to live with and celebrate this identity, which is the blessing of Christ’s incarnation, then we can share the blessing with others.

In his fourth talk, Nouwen tells of going one morning to visit one of the residential houses at L’Arche. He was dressed in an alb and a stole, and he was going to lead a worship service at the house. When he entered the front door, a woman named Janet came up to him, and loudly exclaimed, “Henri, I need a blessing!” Nouwen said that he responded as he supposed any priest would—he laid his hands on Janet, made the sign of the cross, and said, “Janet, I bless you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Janet replied, “No, that doesn’t work!”. “What do you mean, it doesn’t work?” asked Nouwen. “I blessed you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” “No, Henri, that doesn’t work”, she said. “I need a blessing!”

Nouwen entered the room where the service would be held, pondering what kind of a blessing Janet wanted. The residents were seated on the floor in front of him. Later as he concluded the service, Nouwen looked at everyone and said, “Janet needs a blessing!” “Yes!” exclaimed Janet. “I need a blessing!” And she got up and walked over to Nouwen and stood before him and laid her head against his chest. He enfolded her with his arms, and then raised her chin up so that she could see him talking to her. “Janet”, he said, “you are a beautiful woman. You are so beautiful and we love you so much. And I know you’re a little low today, so you need to hear it again. You are the beloved of God, and we love you.” Janet looked up at Nouwen, and said, “Yes, Henri, that’s true!”

As Janet walked back to be with the rest of the gathered community, suddenly everyone started raising their hands and saying, “I need a blessing, too! I need a blessing!” And so one by one, Nouwen gave each of the residents a blessing like the one he had given Janet. The last person to be blessed was a staff volunteer named John. He was from Notre Dame, and was a varsity football player. “What about me. Henri?” he asked. Nouwen beckoned him to come forward, and as he embraced the big, burly athlete, John broke down and began weeping, from the joy of again being blessed with his true identity—a child of God.

It is Christmas morning. Christ has gathered into one things earthly and heavenly, and to all who receive him he has given power to become children of God. I hope you are not alone this day—but if you are, know that Christ has drawn very near to you and seeks to embrace you with his outstretched arms of love. And if you are with friends or family this day, find a special moment to embrace them and tell them that they are beautiful, and that they are deeply loved--because we all have been elevated to an extraordinary place of dignity. And may each of you have a very merry Christmas!