

Text: And before God no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare.

*A woman reports her husband's disappearance to the police. They ask her for a description, and she says, "He is 6' 3" tall, a broad chest and slim hips and has thick, curly hair." Her friends says, "What are you talking about? Your husband is 5' 4", bald and has a huge belly!" And she says, "Who wants that one back?"*

Every once and a while I read a sermon, or book or article by Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor. She is one of the giants of American homiletics of this generation. Part of what makes her a great preacher is her scalpel-like incisiveness and her raw vulnerability (and those two things go together). She understands that the spiritual life teaches us to see as God sees, not as the world sees. I learn from her that it is only possible to be as open and revealing and incisive in the pulpit as she is by being that open and revealing and incisive first to her own self and to God. She bares her soul to others in the pulpit because first she bares her soul to God in prayer. In one article I read she explored that kind of soul-baring prayer and its demand to stand before God *exactly as she is*. And she did not mean this figuratively. She did not mean this metaphorically. She did not mean this only spiritually. She meant it literally. She said she that at least monthly she stands naked in front of a full length mirror and looks at herself, really looks: not to see how she has been taught by society as a woman in her sixties to see and thus to be dissatisfied with herself, not to negatively criticize . . . but to rejoice: to see and to remember her body as the temple God gave uniquely to her. Not to see what the world tells her is wrong with her body, but to see what God reveals to her is right. Not to see what the world tells her is ugly, but to see what God created as beautiful. Not to see an *image* that can never fit the mold of a beautiful body, but to see a reflection of one's own self as created by God, and to see one's own beauty, one's own self, existing in the image of God. In essence, she refuses to stay covered. She remembers that before God no one is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare.

If we were to take just twelve of us here, of all races, both sexes and all ages and have them stand naked before you, you would see RADICAL diversity. You would not see, with any of us, the image of bodily perfection that our culture is pressing on us with touched up, air-brushed pictures and camera angles meant to deceive and artificial lighting that draws the eye this way and that. There is no human being who is that image of perfection: even if one in his early twenties looked that way at one angle at one time, age would do its own work. The world's image of perfection deceives us into thinking we are at best inadequate, and usually ugly, and that we must hide ourselves beneath our clothing.

It can be argued historically that organized religion has often done this to our images of the human soul; that like the centerfold in a pornographic magazine, there is to be observed only the image of a perfect little religious person, which certainly is not you. And this image that religion too often presses on us, is air brushed, touched up with Victorian images of a glowing Jesus with a radiant coif, deceiving us into thinking we are soul-ugly, and that we must hide ourselves, our souls, beneath pretentiously pious clothing.

Here in our own church we have members whose nephew had to come live with them because he was thrown out of his own home as a teenager when he refused to hide his soul and instead told his parents the truth about himself: that he was gay. He was not acceptable as he

was, created in the image of God though he is. But he would not hide beneath pretentiously pious clothing.

*A mother and a father call the police because their son is missing. When the police ask for a description they say he is neatly dressed, has a neat haircut and has three girlfriends. A friend says, "What are you talking about? Your son is wearing torn jeans, mussed hair and has a boyfriend. They say, "Who wants that one back?"*

This time the "joke" is not so funny, is it? With one, small twist the joke that made us laugh at the beginning is making us squirm now. Because it is NOT funny. It is not funny that we think of a child being thrown out of his house by his parents because he is gay or she is lesbian, or is called to be transgender, or cross dresses. Yet in most major cities of our nation there now exist safe houses for just such children, for teenagers who are now homeless because of how God made them, and because their families, usually religious, cannot accept them. The green eyes and the brown hair the skin color are okay, but not any sexual orientation other than straight, straight, straight.

So let's get right to it, now. Let's talk about what it truly means to be Open and Affirming, what it truly means to be radically inclusive. Let's talk about what it means to welcome everyone, even the ones that make us uncomfortable. In a book that changed millions of people's perspective on what it means to be Christian, C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* builds a plot around a senior devil in his office at hell writing to a young devil named Screwtape doing his fieldwork on earth. The fieldwork consists of insuring that his human charge will come to hell, and not go to heaven. The senior devil writes a series of letters to advise young Screwtape how to keep his human charge out of church and away from God. One of the ways Screwtape is counseled to influence the human soul is by reminding that soul how much he simply does not like his neighbors, what with all their profoundly annoying traits and habits and mannerisms and differences. In this letter to Screwtape, the human soul will be going to church for the first time, and Screwtape is to insinuate thoughts into his charge's heart, reminding him that there is nothing special about these Christians and that he should not return to this community:

Dear Screwtape:

. . . When your victim goes inside (the church), he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him a bulletin containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and [a] hymnal containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbours. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like "the Body of Christ" and the actual faces in the next pew. (Screwtape Letters, pp. 15-16)

When we are incisively honest with ourselves, and when as Christ's body we have the courage to stand naked before God exactly as we are, to see not only ourselves, but the actual faces in the next pew, we BEGIN the process of healing, of seeing ourselves and each other as God's own image . . . *exactly as we are*: male female, young old, black white, gay straight, thin corpulent, scarred seamless, hairy smooth. It is then we learn to really see each other, and then

love this church, because we can come here, have the courage to come here, exactly as we are, as a WHOLE people of God, not in some pathetic and distorted image of perfect little Christians (straight, white, and squeaky clean), but in all our radical and glorious differences.

And it even goes beyond that. Our Inclusivity/Open and Affirming Committee is taking seriously what it means that ALL of us are created in the image of God, not just the faces in the next pew. They realize that it is one thing to say we are Open and Affirming and then wait to see if a few people discover this by accident when stumbling uninvited through our church doors, and it is another thing to proclaim this and not to wait for people to come to church, but instead to leave church and go to others to spread the gospel of Jesus' radical inclusivity. Remember, for mature disciples, church is not a physical place we go to; church is an incarnate, beloved community we are sent from. *For mature disciples, church is not a physical place we go to; church is an incarnate, beloved community we are sent from.* SENT from. Understanding this, members of this committee, and any of you who would like to participate, will be going to gay and lesbian bars and other places of gathering. Not, NOT to invite them to be like us, but rather to invite them to teach us the radical diversity that is the image of God, and to invite each other to find ways to spread the gospel message of radical hospitality. Our ONA group is taking seriously one of the global ends of our congregation as articulated by our Council based on our congregation's self-articulated long range plan: *We seek to be a flock that is larger and more diverse, seeking out and embracing folk of every background, without exclusion.*

I can't tell you, I cannot even begin to tell you how grateful I am to be a member of this beloved community of disciples who would evangelize like that. I love this church. Rather than trying to create a god that looks like us, we are trying to create a church that looks like God; and we are trying to understand that we can only look like that by embracing the WHOLE people of God in all its diversity: THAT is God's image.

As a church, we must have the courage—the courage—to stand in that image, to stand naked, to be laid bare, before God and before the world. We must have that discipline, for then we will see our beauty, and the beauty of the faces of those in the pews next to us; then we will see ourselves as God made us; then we will see not what the world tells us is wrong, but see what Jesus tells us is right.

*The conference minister calls the police to report First Plymouth Church is missing. The police ask what the church looks like and he tells them is filled with squeaky clean people who dress perfectly and behave like good little Christians. The associate conference minister says, but First Plymouth is all shapes and sizes and styles and sometimes looks awfully messy; and besides, of course they are not there: they don't see church as a place to go to, but to be sent from: they are out engaging in the community. And the conference minister pauses and says, "Yes, we want that one back."*

And let all the people say AMEN!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious and Merciful God, you spoke your Word into our lives so that in all things we would know how we are to be as people created in your image. You have given us the clarity of your Word so that we will never confuse unhealth with holiness, darkness with light, fear with love, or self-interest with righteousness.

Gracious and Merciful God, you have offered us the life of Jesus as the living proclamation that in every doubt or fear, in every temptation or oppression, we have a companion to uphold us and guide us. In your mercy and by your grace, give us the courage to come before you, laying bare our whole lives in the light of your presence, in humility and holy awe, so that all that is imperfect within us, can be burned away in the flames of your Holy Spirit. Amen.