

Recognizing Our Desires – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

Acts 3:12-19; I John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

Sometimes we have a hard time recognizing when we find the thing that we desire the most. In the early passionate phase of my marriage to Brad (the phase I'd like to think we're still in nearly 26 years later), I used to like to run my fingers through his then wildly-thick 1980s hair. Like all young lovers, even in public I couldn't keep my hands off him. Once when we were at a New Year's Eve party with a group of friends, I came out of the kitchen, walked up behind the couch, and started gently running my fingers through the back of Brad's hair as he sat there in front of me. I was young. . . . I was my beloved's . . . , and he was mine. That night all was well in the universe . . . until I looked fifteen feet across the room and saw Brad talking to one of our other friends. . . . I quickly realized that my hands were not in my husband's hair, and I had just created a very interesting New Year's Eve memory for another party-goer. Like I said, sometimes we have difficulty really recognizing the thing that we desire the most.

In Edith Wharton's tragic and ironic 1905 novel *The House of Mirth*, beautiful, young Lily Bart is determined to secure for herself a husband and a place in rich New York society. Lacking the backing of a wealthy family to secure a rich husband, Lily uses her beauty and charm to move through society. Her good friend Lawrence Seldon cautions her about her choices, but Lily is determined. Unfortunately she has a knack for putting herself in bad situations, and she borrows money carelessly. Her poor choices move her in a continuing downward spiral rather than propelling her into New York high society as she had planned. Eventually Lily is working for a hat-maker; she has nothing left—no money, no reputation, no suitors. Throughout her multiple encounters with Seldon over the course of the novel, Lily fails to recognize that he is in fact a “good” match for her, and she dies unable to conceive of this possibility that is all too obvious for the reader. The story echoes a theme that is common to literature even beyond stories of heterosexual romance, and this theme emerges in our texts this morning. Frequently we don't recognize the thing we are seeking when we find it.

In our passage from Acts 3, the author narrates the story of Peter reprimanding the Israelites for not recognizing Jesus as Messiah. Peter and John are at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they have just healed the man who has been lame from birth. The verse preceding our passage tells us that when the people there saw what had happened they “ran together to them in . . . Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished.” The disciples didn't have much choice at this point besides responding in some way to the crowd that had gathered. Peter takes this opportunity to challenge them as well as the whole of Israel. In verse 12 he begins: “You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?” Then Peter links Jesus to the Israelites' scriptural heritage. Jesus has been “glorified” by the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—the Israelite's God. And according to the author's account of Peter's speech, the Israelites defied their God even

though Pilate was planning to release Jesus. Peter's tone is strong and accusatory. Look at all the second-person pronouns throughout this passage: "you Israelites," "you wonder," "you stare," "you handed over and rejected," "you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you," "you killed the Author of life." And Peter says that it is the one they killed, this "Author of life," in whose name the lame man has been allowed to walk. But despite his strong condemnation of the Israelites' actions in crucifying Jesus, Peter finds them forgivable. They have been watching for the Messiah, but they missed him when he arrived. Their sin was that they didn't recognize Jesus as their Messiah. According to Peter in verse 17, they "acted in ignorance." Peter tells them that once they do recognize Jesus as Messiah, their "sins may be wiped out." Those who have historically misread Peter's accusatory words in this passage to adopt anti-Semitic positions have missed his central argument here. Even in our confused seeking, God is waiting there for us with grace. Frequently we don't recognize the thing we are seeking when we find it. But recognition can bring healing whether you have been lame from birth or have crucified the Lord.

Frequently we don't recognize the thing we are seeking when we find it, so we always need to be on the watch for who or what we're seeking.

In our Gospel lesson for today, we get a second perspective on Jesus' appearance to the disciples in the upper room after his death. Unlike John's version of this story that we heard last week, Thomas is not the primary "doubter", or seeker as Kent described him, among the disciples. Luke says that while the group was listening to the two disciples describe their encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, Jesus was suddenly standing among them. Even though Jesus greeted them in the typical way, "Peace be with you," the disciples are "startled and terrified." They don't recognize Jesus, their Savior, the man they have broken bread with many times. In fact, in Luke's words, they "thought that they were seeing a ghost." Even though at the moment he appeared they were hearing about his encounter on the road to Emmaus, the disciples as a group, according to Luke, assume Jesus to be some sort of apparition. Now before we condemn the disciples for their stupidity in not recognizing Jesus, we need to remember that ghosts and spirits were fairly common in Greco-Roman tradition. In fact they are fairly common throughout the history of folklore and literature from the Odyssey to Hamlet to Scooby Doo. And Jesus had already vanished from sight when he was sitting at table breaking bread with the two disciples he had met on the road earlier. So I don't think it's so far-fetched for the disciples to believe Jesus has come back as a ghost or spirit of some sort. Like other returning spirits, Jesus has plenty he could do when he comes back to earth—visit his loved ones, torment his tormentors. But Jesus isn't the ideal Greco-Roman "ghost." He isn't a disembodied spirit. Luke tells us that Jesus had a physical body; Jesus tells the disciples to look at his hands and feet bearing the marks of his death. Jesus even tells them to touch him so that they will see that he has flesh and bones. He eats broiled fish with them; he must have intestines. He's also not a temporarily resuscitated corpse. In Luke he has already appeared at least one time since his death, and soon after these verses Luke tells us that Jesus ascended into heaven. So while Luke's disciples first believe Jesus to be a ghost, they must have fairly quickly recognized that he went beyond the ghost prototype with which they were familiar. At

first sight the disciples fail to recognize Jesus. He is not what they are expecting. They didn't expect him at all. They weren't watching. He surprised them. Frequently we don't recognize the thing we are seeking when we find it. We always need to watch carefully for who or what we're seeking. And we need to be willing to be surprised by who or what we find in our searching.

In C. S. Lewis's classic *The Horse and His Boy*, after meeting up with King Lune of Archenland and his hunting party and warning them of the impending Calormen invasion, the young Shasta becomes lost in the fog and separated from the King's procession. He begins to feel sorry for himself because of all the bad things that have happened to him. According to the narrator, "What put a stop to all this was a sudden fright. Shasta discovered that someone or somebody was walking beside him. It was pitch dark and he could see nothing. And the Thing (or Person) was going so quietly that he could hardly hear any footfalls. What he could hear was breathing. His invisible companion seemed to breathe on a very large scale, and Shasta got the impression that it was a very large creature. And he had come to notice this breathing so gradually that he had really no idea how long it had been there. It was a horrible shock.

It darted into his mind that he had heard long ago that there were giants in these Northern countries. He bit his lip in terror. But now that he really had something to cry about, he stopped crying."

After continuing on blindly like this for a while, Shasta begins to talk with the unknown being. "Who are you?" he said, scarcely above a whisper.

"One who has waited long for you to speak," said the Thing. Its voice was not loud, but very large and deep.

"Are you—are you a giant?" asked Shasta.

"You might call me a giant," said the Large Voice. But I am not like the creatures you call giants."

"I can't see you at all," said Shasta, after staring very hard. Then (for an even more terrible idea had come into his head) he said, almost in a scream. "You're not—not something dead, are you? Oh please—please do go away. What harm have I ever done you? Oh, I am the unluckiest person in the whole world!"

"Once more he felt the warm breath of the Thing on his hand and face. "There," it said, "that is not the breath of a ghost. Tell me your sorrows."

Shasta confides in the other what he sees as his many misfortunes, including being chased by lions on two separate occasions, and concluding with "If nothing else, it was bad luck to meet so

many lions.” His companion then proclaims himself as the single lion that Shasta has encountered in his travels:

“I was the lion who forced you to join with Aravis. I was the cat who comforted you among the tombs. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept. I was the lion who gave the horses the new strength of fear for the last mile so that you should reach King Lune in time. And I was the lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at night, to receive you.”

In this way Shasta discovers, that, in the events which he perceived as misfortunes, Aslan, in his “divine providence,” had been orchestrating events for his greater purposes. Like the disciples, Shasta doesn’t recognize who is right there beside him. He thinks it might be a giant or like the disciples, a ghost, but in the end, he recognizes Aslan for who and what he is. With this revelation, Shasta slips out of his saddle and kneels before Aslan. Moments later, Aslan vanishes into brightness.

John also refers to this lack of recognition of Jesus as Messiah in our epistle reading from I John 3. John writes that “the world does not know us” as the “children of God” because “it did not know him.” According to John, knowing Jesus will lead to being like Him and seeing Him “as he is”—fully recognizing Him. If we apply John’s words to ourselves, we can say we are the “children of God” now, but we don’t recognize God fully yet. We won’t and can’t completely know God until, according to John, “he is revealed.” God began the work of redeeming the world, both past and present, in Jesus’ resurrection. We must continue to seek and continue to work to recognize what we are seeking. Many of you know that my Mom had a stroke in early March. Every time I see her or try to talk with her on the phone, I try to find signs of the Mom I grew up with, the Mom I know. In the same way every day we need to be watching for marks of Jesus being revealed in the people and events around us. We have recognized him as our resurrected Messiah, but He is continuing to be revealed to us day by day.

Like Lily Bart, Shasta, the disciples, and the Israelites, we often don’t recognize the thing we are seeking when we find it. Let’s watch carefully for the One we are seeking, willing to be surprised by who and what we find.