

Practicing the Presence of God

Revelation 7:9-17

November 25, 2007

I am going to ask you to stretch your memory a little bit and see how much of the popular culture of 1994 that you remember. It was that year in which some college kids with too much time on their hands came up with a game they titled, "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon." They figured that just about every actor or actress in Hollywood could be linked to Kevin Bacon in only six steps.

Here's how it works. Start with Julia Louis-Dreyfus who was in the movie "Christmas Vacation" with Randy Quaid, who was in "Major League II" with Tom Berenger, who was in "Shattered" with Greta Scacchi, who was in "Presumed Innocent" with Harrison Ford, who was in "Raiders of the Lost Ark" with Karen Allen, who was in "Animal House" with Kevin Bacon. Pretty cool, huh?

You all know that my first appointment following seminary was at the Waynedale church. I was one of two Associate Pastors at that time. The other was Nancy Nedwell. She moved out east. During the late 1980's, I took a two week course of study at Loyola University of Baltimore and was able to bunk in at Nancy's house during that time. I haven't seen Nancy for years, but the last time I heard about her, she was pastor of Lovely Lane United Methodist Church in Baltimore.

It was in the Lovely Lane meeting house that the Methodist Church was born in America on Christmas Eve, 1784. Thomas Coke had been set apart as a bishop to America by Wesley himself in England. At the Christmas Conference, we consecrated our very first American Bishop, Francis Asbury. So now my friend Nancy pastors this incredibly historic church. Again, that's pretty cool.

Anyway, Nancy has always said that everyone is only three handshakes away from greatness. I believe her, because I can do it.

I have a friend from Huntington who was given a dog by the sister of Dan Quayle, who as you know was Vice-President under the first President George Bush. So in three handshakes, I can go all the way to a former president.

As I told you last week, my bachelor's degree from college was in sociology. If you look in the classified ads, you will not find too many jobs for "sociologist" listed. Just about the only thing you can do is go on and get a Ph.D. Sometimes, Ph.D's in sociology have to go out of their way to justify their existence on a university faculty, and so a couple of them have investigated this phenomenon of being separated from everyone else on the planet by six degrees. They have concluded that there isn't much evidence to prove it.

Still, we all want to be connected. We all want to have a connection with other people so that we don't feel so alone. Just last month, you remember that I asked you to fill out a card describing Calvary church. The results that came in were fascinating. It was clear

that the most appreciated aspect of our church is our community. The people who come to this church do so in large measure because of the love, caring, and connection they experience from one another. Being connected in this church provides many of us with a sense of security. The connections that we have in this community of faith helps us feel that we won't get lost in a world that can sometimes be so complex and confusing.

I am not going to tell you that the connections that we have with other people are not important, because they are. But I would like to go a step further. I believe that in the final analysis, what is really most important is not our degree of separation from other people. What matters most is our degree of separation from God.

Go to the seventh chapter of the book of Revelation and you find the prophet John telling of a vision he had. In that vision of heaven, he saw a great multitude of people who came from every nation and tribe on earth to stand before the throne of the Lord. They are all there, robed in white and with palm branches in their hands. They cry out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!

They are standing in the presence of God and proclaiming that salvation belongs only to him and to Jesus, the Lamb of God. They are standing in the presence of God, knowing that it is only God through the Lamb Jesus Christ who is working to forgive, heal, strengthen, and save. To stand in front of the throne of God, completely and utterly dependent upon God for everything...that is in fact, no degree of separation.

There are so many things that threaten to separate us from God. Last week I was listening to a Sunday afternoon program on NPR. The program is "Speaking of Faith" and hosts guests who talk about theology, ethics, the church, spirituality, and other aspects of faith. I burned this particular conversation on to a CD so that I could listen to it in my car.

The title of the program was "Money and Morals." As we are coming into the Christmas season, the host and her guest were talking about the ways that our feelings of money have tended to corrupt our values. So much of the time, our money or our desire for more money, places a great barrier between us and God. A constant and steady search for more material goods has the potential to become the object of our greatest devotion, and therefore separates from our true desire – God.

So many things tend to distract us from God and threaten to separate us from heaven. Every day, we are faced with an array of distractions, temptations, and interruptions that have the potential to put dozens of degrees of separation between us and our Lord.

Life is hard and complex. We are bombarded by deadlines, meetings, proposals, and invitations...all of which can take us in many different directions at the same time, and thus rob us of the capacity and the opportunity to see God in all things.

I've spoken before – actually not too long ago – about one of my heroes of the Christian faith. Brother Lawrence, the seventeenth century French monk, learned how to practice

the presence of God throughout his day. Whatever he was doing, he stayed aware of the presence of God with him, over him, under him, through him, and surrounding him.

Practicing the presence of God means that one has a daily determination to look for God in all things, to be aware of his greatness, and to be submitted to his authority. To practice the presence of God means to realize that he loves us, delights in us, and desires a close, personal relationship with us. Practicing the presence of God is a relationship of no degree of separation between us and God. It is a relationship in which we are constantly aware of his saving actions on our behalf. It is a relationship in which our day-to-day activities, no matter what they are, become nothing less than acts of service to God.

In the Scripture lesson for this morning, the vision of John takes us to stand before the throne of God and witness all that is happening there. Before the throne were found a great multitude of white-robed people from every nation, tribe, and language. These were the saints of God. They are just a group of ordinary people – past, present, and future – who have an extraordinary close relationship with God. They are not sinless people, nor are they especially powerful people. But they are connected people. They are linked and connected directly to God and to the Lamb Jesus Christ.

One of the elders asked John the Prophet, “These in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from?” He then answered his own question. They are not necessarily the best, or the brightest, or the most sophisticated, or the most successful. They are however, the ones who have come out of the great ordeal. They are the ones who have washed their robes and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

They are the ones who have emerged from their times of trial, tribulation, distraction, and interruption in order to stand before the throne of God. They are the ones who had to face all of the strains and stresses of humanity...making ends meet in order to feed the family, getting the kids started on their way to a career, getting along with the neighbors, and establishing the basis for a strong marriage. Through all of that and so much more, they were the ones who did their best to remain close to God through prayer, praise, study of the Scripture, and acts of service to one another. They are the ones who have been bloodied in life, but then washed clean by their faith in the Lamb of God.

I am who I am and you are who you are because of the saints of God who have come before us, saints who have gone on to stand before the throne of God in robes washed white by the blood of the Lamb. I am who I am and you are who you are because of our ancestors in the faith who lived their lives with no degree of separation from God, who knew the Lord on an intimate basis, who communicated with him daily, and who walked with him always.

I don't know if you know the name John Shelby Spong or not. He is a retired Episcopal Bishop from Newark, New Jersey. He has done more than just about anyone else inside or outside the American church to spark controversy. His books have provocative titles and even more provocative themes. I don't always agree with him, but I find that he is

stimulating reading because he forces me to think about what I really believe. I read him and become stronger in my ability to defend my own positions and my own theological foundation.

A few years ago he wrote a book titled, “Why the Church Must Change or Die.” According to Spong, the church is old, out of date, and out of step with the times. Our theology, he thinks, isn’t engaging in enough critical thinking to prevent the church from becoming irrelevant.

My first reaction is to say, “Well, what’s new about that.” The church has always been accused of being out of fashion and out of date. Our hymns reflect ages past. When I put on a robe, I am dressing in a garment which has its roots back in Medieval Europe. Our forms of church government, some say, are antiquated. We read out of a book, the Bible, which is very old, with very old ideas, and very old language. WE do not always do a very good job at reaching folks who are different than we are with the gospel. And in fact, many of our Protestant mainline denominations are closing more churches each year than they are building.

But here is where I disagree with the good bishop. The church will never die. I’m not talking about individual churches, but the church universal. The church will never die. People think that the church consists of buildings and parking lots, nursery schools and budgets. People think that the church is to be found in our administrative processes or the clergy or the choir or the United Methodist Women.

But the authors of the old Methodist order for confirmation had it right when they wrote, “The church is of God and will be preserved to the end of time.” The number one reason why the church will never die is because it is a body of believers called out, set apart, and given a purpose by God himself. There is no power on earth which can destroy what God has determined.

The second reason that the church will never die is found in the lives of the saints who have gone on before us. The church we know and love will never die because we have the example of the saints who stand before the throne of heaven in the white robes of salvation. They are the ones who have taught us the hymns, exemplified the Scriptures in their lives, and educated us in the stories of the faith. These are the ones who, having learned what it takes to live with no degree of separation from God, are able to teach us the way.

In John’s vision, the multitude that gathered around the throne of God was so large that no one could count them. They were the ones who, having sung God’s songs throughout their earthly lives, we now singing them before the lamb. These were the ones, John was told, who were faithful, who had kept believing, hoping, witnessing, and giving even when the going got tough. Now they were resting from their labors in the presence of the One who wipes away all tears and guides them to eternal life. These were the ones who, having no degree of separation from God while there were on earth, were now invited into union with him for eternity.

Haywood Hale Broun, the legendary sports columnist and commentator once said that God is always on the side of the team which has the best coach. The Scripture lesson for this morning is clear that God is on the side of those who live continually in his presence.

Eternity awaits us at the end of our earthly lives, if we practice the presence of God in this life. It doesn't matter how many degrees of separation Kevin Bacon is from Harrison Ford. It doesn't matter how many degrees of separation there are between you and the Queen of England. What does matter is your degree of separation from God. My prayer is that all of us may find our place in the multitude of those who worship the Lamb, face-to-face, with God. Amen.