

Those of you who pre-read the Gospel Text for this evening may have noticed that I added a few more verses than the proposed text for today. Remember that John's gospel is often called the 'mystical gospel.' These extra verses give us a wonderful mystical image I would like to explore a bit. The evangelist describes the Beloved Disciple as reclining on the breast of Jesus during the Last Supper. What's contained in this image? A number of things:

First, if we put our head upon someone else's chest, our ear is just above that person's heart and we are able to hear their heartbeat. Hence, in John's image, we see the Beloved Disciple with his ear on Jesus' heart, hearing Jesus' heartbeat, and from that perspective – looking out into the world. Isn't that a beautiful image? Looking out into the world from the heartbeat of Jesus?

This is John's ultimate image for discipleship: the ideal disciple is the one who is attuned to Christ's heartbeat – and sees the world with that sound in their ear.

And there is a second level to the image: it is an icon of peace, a child at its mother's breast, contented, satiated, calm, free of tension, not wanting to be anywhere else. This is an image of primal intimacy, of oneness, a connection deeper even than romantic love.

And for John, it is also a Eucharistic image. What we see, in this image of a person with their ear on Jesus' heart, is how Jesus wants us to imagine ourselves when we are at Eucharist because, ultimately, that is what the Eucharist is – a physical reclining on the breast of Christ. In the Eucharist, Jesus gives us, physically, a breast to lean on, a place of safety and security from which to see the world.

This is an image of how we should touch God – and be sustained by Him in solitude. Henri Nouwen once said that by touching the center of our solitude, we sense that we have been touched by loving hands. Deep inside each of us, like a brand, there is a place where God has touched, caressed, and kissed us. Long before memory, long before we ever remember touching or loving or kissing anyone or anything, or being touched by anything or anybody in this world, there is a different kind of memory, the memory of being gently touched by loving hands. When our ear is pressed to God's heart – to the breast of all that is good, true, and beautiful – we hear a certain heartbeat and we remember, remember in some deep mysterious place, at a level beyond thought, that we were once gently kissed by God.

Archetypally this is what's deepest within us. There is an ancient legend that holds that when an infant is created, God kisses its soul and sings to it. As its guardian angel carries the soul to earth to join its body, she also sings to it. The legend says God's kiss and His song, as well as the song of the angel, remain in the soul forever – to be called up, cherished, shared, and to become the basis of all of our songs. And again, according to the legend, this is how we got this clef in our upper lip – from that primordial, divine kiss. To feel that kiss, to hear that song, requires a deep quiet, a solitude. We do not feel gentleness when inside of us and all around us there is busyness, noise, abrasiveness, anger, bitterness, jealousy, competitiveness, and paranoia. The sound of God's heartbeat is audible only in a certain solitude and in the gentleness it brings.

John of the Cross once defined solitude as 'bringing the mild into harmony with the mild.' That was his way of saying that we will begin to remember the primordial touch of God when, through solitude, we empty our hearts of all that is not mild: busyness, noise, anger, bitterness, and jealousy. When we become mild, we will remember that we have been touched by loving hands and, like the Beloved Disciple, we then will have our ear to the heartbeat of Christ.

Inside each of us there is a church, a place of worship, a sanctuary not made by human hands. And it is a gentle place, a virgin place, a holy place, a place where there is no anger, no sense of being cheated, no need to be competitive, and no need to be restless. It is a soft place; but it can be violated, through a giving of oneself that does not respect oneself, and especially, through lying and rationalizing and the cauterization, warping, and hardening of heart that follow upon that.

It is in that center deep space, entered into through solitude and gentleness of spirit, that we have a privileged access to God, because that is the place where God has already touched us and where we, however dimly, remember that.

We were once touched by hands far gentler and more loving than our own. The memory of that touch is a brand: warm, deep, gentle. To enter that memory is to lean on the breast of Christ, just as the Beloved Disciple did at the Last Supper. From that place, with our ear on Christ's heart, we have the truest perspective on our world. So may it be – for you and for me. Amen. (taken, and slightly adapted, from Ronald Rolheiser, PRAYER: OUR DEEPEST LONGING, p. 65-67)