

Where Is God?

Friday, January 5, 2018

When I was on retreat at Thomas Merton's hermitage at Gethsemani Abbey in 1985, I had a chance encounter that has stayed with me all these years. I was walking down a little trail when I recognized a recluse, what you might call a hermit's hermit, coming toward me. Not wanting to intrude on his deep silence, I bowed my head and moved to the side of the path, intending to walk past him. But as we neared each other, he said, "Richard!" That surprised me. He was supposed to be silent. How did he know who I was? "Richard, you get chances to preach and I don't. Tell the people one thing." Pointing to the sky, he said, "*God is not 'out there'!*" Then he said, "God bless you," and abruptly continued down the path.

The belief that God is "out there" is the basic dualism that is tearing us all apart. Our view of God as separate and distant has harmed our relationships with sexuality, food, possessions, money, animals, nature, politics, and our own incarnate selves. This loss explains why we live such distraught and divided lives. Jesus came to put it all together for us and in us. He was saying, in effect, "To be human is good! The material and the physical can be trusted and enjoyed. This physical world is the hiding place of God and the revelation place of God!"

Far too much of religion has been about defining where God is and where God isn't, picking and choosing who and what has God's image and who and what doesn't. In reality, it's not up to us. We have no choice in the matter. All are beloved. Everyone—Catholic and Protestant, Christian and Muslim, black and white, gay and straight, able-bodied and disabled, male and female, Republican and Democrat—all are children of God. We are all members of the Body of Christ, made in God's image, indwelled by the Holy Spirit, whether or not we are aware of this gift.

Can you see the image of Christ in the *least* of your brothers and sisters? This is Jesus' only description of the final judgment (Matthew 25). But some say, "They smell. They're a nuisance. They're on welfare. They are a drain on our tax money." Can we see Christ in all people, even the so-called "nobodies" who can't or won't play our game of success? When we can see the image of God where we don't want to see the image of God, then we see with eyes not our own.

Jesus says we have to love and recognize the divine image even in our enemies. *Either we see the divine image in all created things, or we don't see it at all.* Once we see God's image in one place, the circle keeps widening. It doesn't stop with human beings and enemies and the least of our brothers and sisters. It moves to frogs and pansies and weeds. *Everything* becomes enchanting with true sight. We cannot *not* live in the presence of God. We are totally surrounded and infused by God. All we can do is allow, trust, and finally rest in it, which is indeed why we are "saved" by faith—faith that this could be true.