

“SURELY GOD IS IN THIS PLACE, AND I DID NOT KNOW IT”

Genesis 28:10-17; Matthew 4:18-22

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Recognition of Christian Educators

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In the fall of 1959, I went to my first-ever church school class—the girls’ kindergarten at St. Edmund’s Episcopal Church. Securely grasping my mother’s hand, I met Mrs. Schlancer, my new teacher. To my five-year-old eyes, she was both intriguing and a little frightening. First of all, she was old. I’d probably now find out she was 40—but she seemed old to me, with the kind of leathery overtanned skin that used to be common in women in Southern California. Her hair was coal black; she chain-smoked through Sunday School class (this was the 1950s), and she wore bright red lipstick, that pooled in the lines around her mouth. I remember mostly being fascinated with that lipstick. When Mrs. Schlancer spoke, she had a deep, gravelly voice. But for all that, she conveyed an air of welcome, knelt down beside me and told me with earnest conviction that the church was the place where God lived; in her class I was going to learn wonderful things about God, and Jesus, and the church. To begin, she sat me down at a small table with two other students and a brand new box of crayons, and she gave me an illustration to color. It was a picture of God, seated on a throne, with flowing hair and beard, a bishop’s miter on his head, and one hand raised in blessing. I was hooked. My mother tiptoed softly out the door, and I applied my very best efforts to filling in the contours and colors of this wondrous God who, I knew from that moment, had welcomed me to this new place.

Forty-six years later, on a frosty Saturday morning, I found myself approaching another new house of God, the Sri Lakshmi Hindu Temple, in Ashland, Massachusetts—a large rectangular white stucco building topped by three ornately carved towers. The entrance portal also was decorated with elaborate bas relief carvings of both human and animal figures, the most prominent of which was a being with the head of an elephant and the body of a human, seated on a mouse. It was Ganesha, one of the most beloved of the Hindu deities: Ganesha, the guardian of the threshold, the god of auspicious beginnings. I recognized him from the previous week’s lectures in my Hinduism class, and in that recognition felt my first stirrings of welcome in this unfamiliar setting. My classmates and I had come both to tour the temple and to view a Hindu ritual—the abisheka, the anointing of Lord Vishnu. We took off our shoes and entered the main worship space. The abisheka was about to begin, so the herd of Harvard students joined about 70 worshippers as two priests, clad only in loincloths, entered the enclosure around a full-sized stone statue of Vishnu. First they poured milk over the statue—about five grocery store gallon jugs—then honey, followed by a paste of spices, then yogurt, all the time chanting in atonal melodies strange to my ears. When the lustration was complete, the priests circulated among the crowd carrying pots of the milky mixture. Worshippers and guests were invited to take a sip. Then the priests returned to their labors. With pot after pot of water, they cleansed the statue, and when all the previous offerings had been removed, they closed a curtain between them and us.

It was all so foreign to me as an act of worship. At first I didn't know what to make of it. I looked around at the worshippers. They stood, heads bowed, palms pressed together in loving devotion, and I was touched. Then the curtains were reopened and the people looked as one on the image, now dressed in robes of saffron, with garlands of marigolds around his neck and over his feet, and falling from his one hand upraised in blessing. On the dais in front of him were placed a bowl of rice, bouquets of flowers, a pot of melted butter, a plate of fruit. I realized that what I was seeing was an act of extravagant hospitality, a hospitality given not just out of devotion to the divine, but as a reminder to the worshipping community of the hospitality owed to all of the divine creation. I saw the image, I saw the faces of the people, and my palms came together and I bowed my head with theirs to the presence of the holy.

“Yaakov went out from Beer-sheva and went towards Haran, and encountered a certain place. He had to spend the night there for the sun had come in.” There in an unfamiliar place, Jacob lay down his head and dreamt of a great ladder set up upon the earth; and all up and down it, the angels, the messengers of God, were ascending and descending. And there was God, the god of his ancestors, announcing to him God's blessing. “I am with you; I will watch over you. I will bring you back to this soil. Indeed I will not leave you.” Jacob awoke from his sleep, and looked around. Nothing was different, and yet everything was changed, and he cried out, “Surely God is in this place and I, I did not know it!”

This morning we celebrate the ministry of Christian education, a ministry that begins as we teach the basics of our faith to our children and youth, and, one hopes, never ends for any of us as long as we draw breath. This education can be as simple as a kindergarten coloring project or as complex and strange to us as the abishaka of Lord Vishnu. So what does it mean to do Christian education? What are we trying to accomplish both with our children and with ourselves in our religious education endeavor? I would like to suggest this morning that in religious education we learn about the Bible and theology, about church history and worship and ethics, about the imperatives of love, justice, and humility. That's the content of the education. But if we learn these things as religious education, we learn them not just for that knowledge itself, but so that we might have a better chance to know the experience of Jacob in this morning's scripture: we learn all that we can so that we might be better able to see behind all the varied circumstances of our lives the upraised hand of the all-blessing God, and we might be brought to say again and again, “Surely God is in this place and this place and this place, and until now I, I did not know it.”

The warmth of Mrs. Schlancer's welcome to me when I was five years old was Christian Education because it led me to believe that the upraised hand of God in my coloring project was indeed a hand of blessing. The lectures of Diana Eck at Harvard were Christian Education because they allowed me to see that the upraised hand of Lord Vishnu, in a ritual once completely foreign and devoid of meaning to me, signifies the same divine presence and the same generous blessing. Surely God is in all places, but we don't always see it. We don't see it until we learn something new, until someone gives us a context, until some action makes it real.

The basic transaction of religious life is simple: we are brought to see the signs of a divine presence in the world, and in faith and love, we respond to that presence. It's that simple. We see and we respond. We like to focus on the response part—the doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly part. But we cannot respond unless we have seen, and we often will not see unless we know where and how to look.

This morning I celebrate the ministry of Christian Education, and I pray for each person here that over and over again in your life, in the midst of probably nothing in particular, you will see behind what is—the dim image of the divine one, hand upraised in blessing, and you, like Jacob, will come to know that the moments of our life are lived in the house of God and the gateway to heaven. Thanks be to God. Amen.