

July 23, 2017

## The Greatest Distance

In the name of God who shortens even the greatest distance.

This week some friends and I were driving back to Austin after a trip to San Antonio. As we were going up Interstate 35 we entertained the idea that if we were to keep driving we could get to Chicago in just over sixteen hours, enough time to get there and back and have two hours in the city, before our next outstanding commitments. We had previously shared a twenty-two hour bus ride to Paris and the prospect of another adventure, this time to the north, was appealing. It was exciting this idea to follow our hearts and keep driving, to travel so far and see what we would encounter, the adventures that would await us.

By the time we reached Round Rock we had unanimously decided this was, rationally, not the best idea, and planning more for such a trip would do us well in the future. We stopped at Ikea and turned back.

It would have been a novel and spontaneous trip, but long. It is 1164 miles from Austin to Chicago. There are long trips, and I imagine many of you have been on even longer trips! By car, bus, train, or plane around and across the world. But even this long trip to Chicago is not an insurmountable distance, we could have done it. There are, however, distances that do *seem* insurmountable and a phrase I hear more and more now is that the greatest distance is the 18 inches between your head and heart. And this distance, give or take a few depending on your height, between the head and the heart can seem insurmountable but this is the distance we must all travel to live well.

In college, I loved the required moral theology course I took and from it I did an independent study about conscience, from a Christian perspective. This is not conscious, how or what we are aware of in and around us but conscience, like a moral compass. The definition I worked with most in this study, comes from the Catholic Sulpician monk and moral theology professor, Richard Gula, who defines conscience as the place where head and heart meet and where we hear God.<sup>1</sup>

Funny that this sometimes seemingly insurmountable distance is exactly where we meet and hear God.

For a very long time God has tried to bridge for us the seemingly insurmountable distances.

As we heard last week in Genesis, Jacob, brother to Esau, leaves his brother, and leaves his family to journey to a new land. To find his wife. Jacob is a faithful follower of God, son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham and he will find his wife Rachel who will give birth to twelve sons. Jacob will later be named Israel by God and these twelve sons of his will form the twelve

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Gula, *Moral Discernment*

tribes of Israel. But, despite this divine heritage, prior to today's dream, Jacob has yet to directly encounter God.

In between leaving his family and finding his wife Jacob finds this in between place where he goes to sleep with a rock as his pillow. There, Jacob has a vision of how *another* seemingly insurmountable distance, that between heaven and earth, is bridged. He sees this ladder going from heaven to earth—the ladder is probably more of a ramp, derived from the Mesopotamian ziggurats—big ramps in the center of cities that priests would ascend to make their sacrifices to the God-- Jacob sees this ramp going up to heaven and down to earth-- and on it are angels—messengers of God going up and down. As an aside, the angels are probably look more like human beings than winged creatures in white and gold carrying harps. As romantic as that vision might be.

But it is not the vision where Jacob hears God. Rather, the passage says, God appears beside him and speaks to him, "I am the Lord the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring...and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Jacob hears God and the seemingly insurmountable has been...surmounted. Heaven and earth come together and Jacob receives the deepest reassurance of God, "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go...I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

And I wonder what this really sounded like, was it the booming voice of God from the top of the ramp or was it heard in the quietest of places, where in Jacob, the head and heart come together and guide him beyond where he can go on his own.

Within us all, on an exponentially smaller scale than this two-way ramp God's messengers climb up and down, is the ramp, the ladder, of sorts that connects our head and our heart. As Christians, we are called to listen to our conscience, that sweet spot where our thoughts and our feelings, our imagination and experiences meet together and help us make choices and listen for what it is God would have us do. What God would have us deeply and truly do or not do in love and light, in peace and courage, in endurance and goodwill for all people. Our conscience is an element of who we are that reminds us we are made in God's image, God has created us to reflect his goodness

And our conscience, this place we hear God, is meant to inform everything we do. I'm confident that when this distance between head and heart is bridged, when we act from our conscience—a place of dignity, faith, integrity, courage and love, when we act from that place—it is not just us that is changed, but in some way, the distance between heaven and earth lessens, too.

Those 1164 miles to Chicago would have been fun and memorable. There would have been adventures, deep conversations, plenty to laugh about and difficulties, too. There would be new sights and discoveries as there was for Jacob as he traveled into a new land. And the

journey between head and heart has all that as well but we are travelling towards something different—to hear and know God. And that is something we can do from right where we are.

We give thanks for those ancestors of our faith, like Jacob who tried to listen, to follow the will of God for them—knowing well it may be a difficult journey, probably not what they first had in mind...or in their heart. But who, with God's help acted and loved from their conscience, this place where head and heart meet and we hear God.

Amen.