

PARTY OF THREE  
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Mayer  
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany  
January 23, 2022

As you know, I will soon be leaving you to return exclusively to my “other life” as a psychotherapist. In my psychotherapy practice, I work with people all along the spectrum of religious belief and practice. Some have chosen to work with me partly because I am also a priest. Some are not even aware of my priesthood. But many feel more comfortable talking to someone who honors the life of faith, and I greatly value those moments with clients in which faith and psychotherapy meet.

A few years ago, I had such a moment and I would like to share it with you. I work with a client, a man of 50 whom I will call Jim, who happens to be ordained in another denomination, and who at that time held an important position in the ecumenical world. He had lived all over the world, travelled widely, and had done very significant work in his life. But he had struggled greatly in relationships and had never married, though he very much wanted to.

That year, the holidays were very hard for Jim. He felt depressed and angry with himself. This was especially so because he was involved with someone who clearly wanted to marry him, and was very suitable “on paper,” as Jim put it. But he said there was a wall up between them, a wall he had built, that he couldn’t seem to knock down.

Jim’s deep fear in life was that no-one would ever be able to truly share in or understand his deep sense of calling, and how it shapes his life. His woman friend was clear with him that it was probably true that she would never fully understand, but that she loved him, supported what he was doing with his life, and wanted to be on the journey with him. But Jim insisted in his sessions with me that this was just not enough. So, he repeatedly distanced her emotionally, and he despaired that he would once again not be able to go forward in a relationship.

I remember clearly that it was in a session right after New Year’s that Jim told me that he knew it was time to propose marriage but just couldn’t bring himself even to consider it. I decided to take a chance. I said, “You know, Jim, if you were to marry, there would be three parties involved, not just two.” I thought he would know what I meant, but he didn’t. “Who would that be?” he asked. And, as you are probably guessing, I said, “Jesus.”

To my surprise, it seemed like this was a new thought for Jim. And after that therapy session, things began to shift for him. The idea that Jesus would be partnering with Jim and his partner, showing the way when things seemed unclear, bringing hope and courage when things seemed dark and difficult, and maybe even opening up to each one of them the things that mystified them about each other, emboldened Jim. He began to remove the wall he had built and take the risk of real closeness with another human being.

It didn’t escape my attention at the time that this work was going on during the season of Epiphany. I really do find in my work that themes from the liturgical year turn up in people’s lives as if on schedule. Epiphany is the season of what the Gospel of John calls signs--reminders that God in Jesus makes himself manifestly present in our lives. This was what my client kept forgetting. Remembering that he was not alone allowed him to risk taking down the wall he had built, knowing that God would be present in his relationship as a third party.

This week’s Epiphany sign is not from John but from Luke and it is a text in which God literally walks into the lives of Jesus’ home community and makes himself known in the person of Jesus. We are at the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. He has just defied the devil in the wilderness

after being baptized by John, and the first thing Jesus does is go home. In his home synagogue on the sabbath, “as was his custom,” Luke tells us (Luke 4:16), Jesus stands up to read, and is given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Listen again to the text Jesus finds and reads to the community he has known all his life:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

And then he says the stunning thing: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21). Now, Jesus is saying, when I am with you, the Messiah is with you: God’s anointed one is in your presence, bringing release and recovery and freedom.

And once again: Jesus begins by announcing this stunning truth to his own community, his family and friends. The message of the season of Epiphany is that God’s special relationship with Israel is extended now to all people and is brought into the events of our daily lives in a new way. My client Jim--who by the way got married to his partner last summer--changed his behavior once he remembered this truth about the proximity of God in all of our lives, that God in the person of Jesus partners with us in all of our relationships. We are never flying solo.

I think we learned this together in a very deep way over the past year, as we navigated our way to becoming Grace Church. Today, stop and ask yourself this: is there any place in your life that you need to be reminded that the same Jesus who companioned us in our parish journey is present as a third party for you? In your marriage? In your life as a parent, or child, or sibling, or friend? In your work life? Somewhere else?

Take time to reflect on this in these marvelous, sign-filled days of the Epiphany season. Not one of us is alone. Jesus is right beside you. Just remember to ask for what you need.

Amen.