

Pentecost Sunday
Sermon 6.9.19

Romans 8:14-17

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

John 14:8-10, 15-17, 25-26

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ... ¹⁵ "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you...I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

I go home from church tired each week. After worship, I go home to doze, to nap. I've often wondered at this. Being in worship isn't the most strenuous thing. So, why?

Last week, you might remember, Jake asked about the problem of evil. During the Homily of the People, he asked a question, what to do about the reality of evil, in response to it. I remember making the connection between this and something in the sermon, though now I don't know what that was. I remember thinking that direct questions during the Homily of the People are tricky because these aren't really what the Homily of the People is about—not a question-and-answer session but a sharing of our meditation more akin to a Quaker meeting. I remembering thinking that he had asked a direct question, though, so for me not to answer it would be dodgy, coy. I remember thinking he'd asked one of the oldest religious questions there is. The oldest is said to be, "Why is there something instead of nothing?" The next oldest is probably this, "Why, if God is love and God is good and God is the creative power behind all that is, why is there evil?" I remember *thinking*, as if he were presenting me something to think about, and from this stance I answered. "Paul said... Jesus said..."

It was a perfectly acceptable answer, except that it wasn't. It didn't answer the question he'd *actually* asked. Though it did answer the question he had functionally asked, he had

instrumentally asked, it only did that, answered the question that he used for the asking, used for the making way for meeting.

I realized this when a shift happened, and I don't know if you could see this shift when it happened, but it felt so total that it might even have been visible. At this shift, I was awakened to the question behind the question, or better to say I was awakened to Jake's presence instead of just his question—because I sense he meant not to present something *about* which we could talk but to present himself, Jake-self, a presenting of Jake from where Jake stood so I might present myself from where I stood, now in relation to Jake, in an encounter with Jake, a meeting with Jake instead of this mis-meeting I had made with my very correct answer.

This is all very Buberian, to coin a term, though I hadn't yet read Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, or in German *Ich und Du*. I hadn't yet read it; that would be this week.

It's worth saying, *du* in German doesn't translate easily into English because we've lost the differentiation between the formal "you" and the intimate "you." The formal "you" was once used for addressing people whom we held in formality in our minds—elders, professionals, otherwise strangers we'd pass on the street, groups of people like audiences. This, though, has come to be the catch-all "you." Meanwhile, the once intimate "thou" has come to sound so formal as to be useless, heard only in church, and even then only to mean God. Incidentally, the term Jesus used for "father," the Greek term *abba*, is more like Daddy, the intimate term for "father." Funny that all the intimate ways by which we'd once have named this most intimate presence, God, have become so formal as to be as a starched collar, and one too small at that—God who, according to Buber at least, "is the mystery of the obvious that is closer to me than my own I."

Jake is away this week, at home, in California. As for last week, he indicated no specifics of why he stood where he did with the question. But after addressing the question itself, I had called to my mind a recent meeting where I had presented to me other people who stood with the question of evil, in a conversation I'd recently had at the prison with people for whom the problem of evil is no mere abstract thing, a theological puzzle, but an ordinary, everyday thing. Remembering *that* helped me meet Jake where he seemed to be asking me to meet him, to regard Jake not as an "It" to which I could respond appropriately but as a "Thou" who I felt suddenly sure wasn't looking for content but encounter, actual encounter.

"All actual life is encounter."

This also is very Buberian—and this turn toward Jake at the sounding of his question involved for me the rest of you falling away. The self-consciousness I felt in his asking the question in the presence of you all, in front of whom I must now answer, fell away. Suddenly I was as “I” in an encounter with him as “Thou,” as I recognized I’d become a “Thou” to his “I,” each of us a full and whole person who met in the Between, each from where we stood in mutual recognition.

I tell you this not because the encounter between “I” and “Thou” last Sunday was so very unusual. I tell you this because it’s so very usual. Really, I’d say it’s characteristic of worship here in Monterey, that we encounter one another as much as we see and hear and imagine one another, that we are each someone else’s “Thou” as much as we each interact with one another as It, even if a highly regarded It.

No wonder I go home tired. You too?

To encounter one another is to take your stand as “I” and to enter into full presence with a “Thou,” to allow yourself to be a “Thou” in the perceiving of someone else who is their own “I.” This is *not* to filter the “Thou” through any preconceptions, which would shift the “Thou” to an “It.” This is not even to subject the Thou to the scrim of your remembered past experiences of this now “Thou,” which also would shift the “Thou” to an “It.” And this is not to present yourself in such a way that dodges becoming a “Thou” to your “Thou’s” I. You’re not performing yourself for the perception of the other; you’re submitting yourself to be received as wholly present so to meet in Between, in mutual presence—not a melding of the minds, but a meeting of them, not a subsuming of one into another but two brought into full and mutual presence.

Don’t get me wrong, though: there’s nothing inherently off about an I-It relation, even between two people. Really, I-It is as fundamental as I-Thou. Actually, according to Buber, these are the two attitudes we can hold in the world, I-It and I-Thou, and both are valid and valuable. As M. M. Owen wrote from *Aeon*, an on-line journal, just last month of Buber on this 100th anniversary year of *Ich und Du*, “It is necessary and unavoidable that in life we treat certain things [and even people] as Its. This is how we change a light bulb, follow a recipe, collect data, or compose a mathematical proof.” Furthermore, this is how we decide who will walk the dogs, whether we’ll get a new banner for the front of the church, and who will be involved in the Memorial Day parade. What’s still more, even Thou’s will rest in our memory or in our anticipation as It’s, since Thou-ness can only reside in the present, in actual presence. You can’t

conjure up Thouness when not in the presence of a possible Thou, and you can't become a Thou to someone who is not in your presence.

But even given physical presence, you can't impose a true meeting between yourself and another; you can't force or coerce or arrange a true meeting in Between. No, for true meeting is a thing spontaneous and mutually consented to, though not through the will alone, but through will and grace. Rest assured, there are as many mis-meetings as there are meetings, which isn't itself a problem or even indicative of a problem. That's just life.

What is a problem is when I-It is all someone can manage, the only mode or attitude ever operated within. And in Buber's estimation, from nearly a century ago and according to M. M. Owen, "much of the alienation and stupefaction of modern living can be put down to our over-reliance on the I-It. 'Without It,' Buber wrote, 'man cannot live. But he who lives with It alone is not a man,'" not a full person.

This he wrote in 1916 when *Ich und Du* first came to him, in 1919 when he'd completed a first draft of it, in 1922 when he had a final version. Portentous times for I-It living, right? Hitler and the Nazis, those ultimate instrumentalists, were just getting ginned up. In fact, Buber, a German Jew who escaped the Nazis, understood this about Hitler, that he was someone who had no Thou in the world, could approach and address no one else as Thou but only as It, and could never be a Thou to someone else as I.

And it feels true all over again, if you ask me, newly relevant again, this book that's been dormant on my shelf for as long as I can remember. Suddenly, it's been calling to me. In the last few weeks, I've felt myself reaching for the word "Thou," a word I think I've never used. And that shift that happened last week is happening to me more and more.

This I and Thou, this way of naming a way of relating, feels relevant, though not only for the portentousness of our time, but moreover for all the mundane, everyday ways that we miss each other, even toxically so. In this age of communication, have our attempts at connection ever been so fraught with misunderstanding and mis-connection? In this age of the internet and social media, has a society ever been so anti-social in its common speech as ours has fast become—for can text itself, words flat on a screen absent the breath of life, ever rise to the level of true and actual communication, can posts and tweets and email messages ever serve in the same spirit as mutual presence?

I'm guessing not.

As for the book itself, *Ich und Du*, it is as much “Thou” as it is “It,” something Buber encountered more than understood. In its having given itself to Buber, they are together an I-Thou, the book a spirit that would take form, a small book of dense writing that best makes sense in the reading of it, that dissipates as soon as you put the book down and try remember it or figure it out.

Thus it exemplifies how Thou's may not just be other people, can also be a manifestation of nature or nature itself, can also be spirit-taking-forms like art to which you as an I might devote yourself—a book you might not simply read (or write) but might encounter, a piece of art you might not just observe or study but might meet with, an artifact of culture that you might not merely register or even consume but one with which you might enter into dialogue. All of this is spirit-taking-form and thus each is a Thou, which you as I might address while it, as if I, addresses you, the Thou. Perhaps it's even this quality that makes art, art—its ability to engage its audience as a Thou as if it were an I.

When this happens, when true encounter takes place, when a meeting becomes actual, then “...no purpose [for it] intervenes,” as Buber put it. It is its own purpose. It is intrinsic and alive rather than for another end; it is essential rather than instrumental.

So, for example, “Does prayer work?” people will ask, and the answer is that the question makes no sense because prayer isn't something that can be put to some end other than itself, for to do so is to make it no longer prayer. Prayer, being a meeting, an encounter, between an I and the Eternal Thou, cannot then be made to work for some purpose other than the prayer, for to do so is to wrestle the Eternal Thou into an instrumental It, something that cannot be done.

Which brings us to the Eternal Thou, this which is altogether “Other” and altogether “Same” and altogether “Present,” this who “expresses a unity of presence in which the transcendent manifests the imminent and the imminent also manifests the transcendent.”

Of this so-called Eternal Thou, Buber writes, “One does not find God if one remains in the world; one does not find God if one leaves the world. [One finds God when simply going] forth to that one's Thou with that one's whole being and carries to it the whole being of the world...” So, neither materialism nor mysticism will make present true encounter. Neither secular modernism nor new age spirituality will abide. Again Buber: “When you fathom the life of things

and of conditionality, you reach the indissoluble; when you dispute the life of things and conditionality, you wind up before the nothing; when you consecrate life you encounter the Living God.”

In a sentence, as Kenneth Paul Kramer wrote in his volume *Martin Buber's I and Thou: Practicing Living Dialogue*, “God is the immediate presence of the ‘Wholly Other’ who *happens* in every genuine relationship with nature, with persons, and with spirit becoming forms, and who creates, reveals, and redeems through each unique relational act. God is always, according to Buber, ready to enter into a partnership with anyone who turns with their whole being toward the unknown God,” this wholly Other who is wholly Present, this Eternal Thou, a Presence who happens—happens in every I-Thou encounter, happens in every true meeting in Between, happens whenever the transcendent is made imminent and whenever the imminent is made transcendent.

We meet the Eternal Thou best when we meet with any Thou, and in every meeting of I-Thou the Eternal Thou takes place.

Pentecost is one of the most important Holy Days of the Christian Year. It’s also one of the most challenging, for preaching at least, and for wordy Protestants who mistake an understanding of concepts for an encounter with substance, who mistake sound thinking and intelligible communication for truth and worship.

Pentecost Sunday is the day we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit to us. But I admit I annually wonder whether you can preach *about* the Holy Spirit, this thing that is the current of any true preaching but is hardly ever the content of true preaching, this thing that can be felt and recognized and is indeed present, but can hardly be seen straight on, can hardly be made present. This is a thing glimpsed, a thing given, or ungiven, even withheld—and when given best done interpersonally, in the Between of two consenting whole people, consenting by will summoned and by grace given. But to expect it beforehand, to anticipate like a train to arrive in a station is to make less possible its presence, showing up in the present as it does and at no other time.

Will it have happened this morning for you?

If not, then maybe you won’t need a nap this afternoon.

If so, then thanks be to God.