

Matthew 1:18-25 The Casual and the Formal
December 18, 2022

We live in the era of the casual; casual Fridays, country-club casual, casual relationships. We have discarded the tie and unbuttoned the top button, learned to be on a first-name basis with everyone in almost any setting, and, abandoned some of the formalities that were common in the past.

With regard to religion, the last forty and fifty years has also seen the trend towards a more casual church experience, with blue jeans and t-shirts, in some churches, removing altar tables and pulpits, and preachers with robes and clerical collars, stained glass and pipe organs, and becoming less liturgical, more relaxed, less intimidating.

I respect the nature of the trends over the last few decades, they were a reaction against the excessive formality of the previous times which sometimes devolved into the pretentious dressing up for show. The pendulum has swung away from all that. The danger was that church had become too formal, and *that* excessive formality came to characterize our relation to God.

So on the other hand, and as a reaction against the trends of our times, lest we fall to the danger of becoming *too casual* in our relation to God, we emphasize a magnificent God, spectacular, anything but casual, before whom the formalities are perhaps more appropriate.

Sometimes standing at attention, being silent, engaging a little wonder and amazement at the magnificence of life, beyond human understanding, is good for the soul, as long as it doesn't become stuffy and pretentious, devoid of meaning.

There is another set of words we might consider this morning, the immanent and the transcendent. The casual and the formal, the immanent and the transcendent; they may not exactly correspond, but maybe they can help us understand each other.

Religion can become distorted if the focus is always on one or the other, transcendence, or immanence, in the same way that our relation to God can become a distorted if we always take a too casual, or a too formal approach.

The great paradox of our faith is the conviction that God is high over us, distant, remote, grand, like the fantastic pictures of the universe that come from the Webb Space Telescope, and at the very same time close to us, within us, and in a way that is not threatening. It is good to try to find the right balance.

At this time of the year when the tilt of the earth causes the daylight to ebb, when things are colder out and we tend to stay inside more, if we can, it is good to reflect upon the nearness of God to each of us.

The word for this consideration is, "immanent," with an "a" in the middle, which means, "to exist or operate *within*." God is *present* with us, and not merely as an

overseer who sees all we do and knows our inmost thoughts, but as a trusted friend who cares deeply, comforts, strengthens, guides, forgives, empowers.

I am reminded of the popular hymn, “In the Garden,” which says,

“And he walks with me and he talks with me,
and he tells me I am his own.
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
none other has ever known.”

Part of the human experience of God is one of close proximity and individual attention. With this nearness comes a relaxed familiarity.

Let us consider this immanence for a moment. It is at the birth of Jesus, when we celebrate the approach of the divine into the human world that we focus on the humanity of Jesus and the friendship of God, a more casual, less formal relationship.

In the 7th chapter of the Book of Isaiah there is a snippet of a conversation that is repeated in the text from St. Matthew’s Gospel,

“The virgin will be with child and give birth to a son, and they will call him, “Immanuel,” which means, ‘God with us.’”

In Matthew’s presentation of the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph were betrothed when she became pregnant, and to Joseph, this meant that she had

been unfaithful, but because he loved her, he did not want to hurt her, and he was honorable, he had it in mind to break off the engagement without making a fuss.

In a dream he was encountered by an angel who told him of the nature of her conception, that the child is of the Holy Spirit, and will be called, Immanuel. Joseph was told to accept her and the child, and name him Jesus, which is a form of the name, “Joshua,” and means, “savior,” because he would become the means of salvation from sin, and meaninglessness, and despair.

So that is what Joseph did.

So if we are to relax a little in this season, move away from the formal approach to a mighty God who is the mysterious source of all life, maybe wear blue jeans, unbutton the top button, and a comfortable sweater, let us be reminded that God’s loving presence with us, and mercy towards us, is as equally grand a miracle as the creation of the vast universe.

As a matter of fact, it may be a greater miracle, because it must overcome the hardness of the human heart, crusted over by the traumatic experiences of life and the habitual self-centeredness that gums up the works and makes friendship difficult, nearly impossible.

But nothing is impossible for God, so our prayer is that sometime in the middle of this celebration of

immanence in the birth of Jesus, it will dawn on each of us how great it is, the love of God that has given us life, and met us here in the darkness to save our souls.

And when that happens, and it may not happen in church, but at home on the sofa in pajamas, but whenever, the casual and the formal meet, at least for a moment in your mind, come to attention, be silent before it, and offer a salute to the one whose birth is our life . . .

Amen.

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