

The Mother Lode
A Sermon in Two Parts
Revs. Pamela Patton and Kathleen Rolenz – Part 2 by Rev. Rolenz
All Souls NYC
Sunday, May 11, 2025

I cannot count the number of weddings I've done where this text from I Corinthians 13 was chosen. Even for notoriously secular Unitarian Universalist weddings – there is something about this passage that couples – well -- just love. Of course, Paul wrote these words not intending them to be about the love between two people, but the kind of love and commitment it takes to build a community, writing as he was to the fractious, diverse, and often divided community at Corinth. But what I find most intriguing about this passage – is not the descriptions about love, but this passage: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see through a mirror darkly, but then face to face, now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known.”

Those three sentences contain the entire arc of our human life – and the pulse and impulse that is with us since before we were born...the desire to be truly, completely and utterly *known* by another human being. When Pamela and I were in conversation about this Sunday’s service, she was inspired by a recent book by David Brooks, *How to Know a Person*. In that book, Brooks describes his reason for writing it. He asks people to tell him about the times when they’ve felt seen – truly seen. “They talk about a time when someone perceived some talent in them that they themselves weren’t even able to see. They talk about a time when somebody understood exactly what they needed at some exhausted moment – and stepped in, in just the right way, to lighten the load.”¹ But Brooks also cites a spiritual reason – he says “no one can fully appreciate their own beauty and strengths unless those things are mirrored back to them in the mind of another. There is something about being seen that brings forth growth.” [I want to acknowledge here that though we use the words “sight” to refer to our eyes, those who are blind also have the ability to experience the same insights through other senses.] For both Paul and for David Brooks, the beginning of wisdom is in first, knowing self, to wipe the mirror clean so that it more accurately reflects the true self – and to know others in all our beauty and our broken places.

¹ How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing, Kindle edition 161 of 278; 20%

Who knows you? I mean really knows you? Is it – or was it – your spouse or partner? For those who are in a long-time relationship, there is a great comfort in being known. We can see a certain look on our partner's faces – we've seen it hundreds of times before – and we assume we know what they're thinking. Maybe we can finish their sentences because they have said the same thing, in the same way, hundreds of times before. And yet, while a blessing, this knowing and being known can also be a limitation, because as human beings, we can only see in part – we cannot fully comprehend the mystery of another or even make room for the inevitable changes that occur over a lifetime.

In this faith tradition, we often remind ourselves of the axiom that “revelation is not sealed.” By that, our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors meant that while the books of the Bible were closed many centuries ago, there are always new insights to be revealed; that if we mine it deeply enough – we can find the veins of precious insights into human nature as well our relationship with the greatest mystery of all – God – the Spirit of Life itself. The desire to know others is born from a deeper desire – to be truly, fully, utterly known and loved, not only as a child of human parents, but as a child of God.

Brooks's book is an exploration into that longing – to know others and to be fully known. He describes a moment, while looking up from his book in the late afternoon, to see his wife, standing in the doorway. Her gaze was resting on a white orchid. It's a moment that I have seen depicted in hundreds of paintings, an unguarded moment of repose. And Brooks describes this moment when he says to himself "I know her, I really know her, through and through." It was a moment of, as he describes "beholding." "when you are beholding someone, you're seeing the richness of this particular human consciousness, the full sympathy – how they perceive and create their life....it was a delicious moment – warm, intimate, profound."

Although that act of beholding was part of an intimate relationship, I experienced another type of beholding in corporate worship during Covid. While serving as the interim at All Souls in Washington DC, we had to figure out a way to retain the intimacy of the worship service, while on Zoom. So, we came up with the idea of a time of "beholding." We invited people to turn their cameras on, sound off and while our music director played music, we would simply gaze at the faces on the screen – seeing one another and being seen by others. At first, it was awkward, shy smiles, laughter, but it later became some members favorite part of the worship service.

And , for some members who had been estranged from other members, this beholding time softened their hardened hearts and, allowed some healing to begin.

Who knows you – who *really* knows you? For some of us, the answer might be our mothers. Whether our biological or adopted mother, these are generally the persons who know us in a way that no one else does. I want to acknowledge the danger in saying this because there are some among us who may have never known their mothers, or never had a very good relationship with them, as a child or now. There are those among us who have lost our mothers, are estranged from our mothers, or who find that our mothers cannot accept the adult we’ve become instead of the child they thought they knew.

I feel fortunate in that I had a really good mom – or, as she would say “a good enough mother.” She wanted children—and she was always there for us. And yet, it wasn’t until after she died that I realized how much of her I didn’t know, because I could only see her through the lens of being her daughter, not as a friend and not as a colleague. For as intimate as the mother-daughter relationship is and can be – there was a part that I didn’t see – maybe didn’t even want to see.

When I found her journals after she died, I was initially shocked to realize that she didn't feature me in them at all! There were whole landscapes of her life, her thoughts, her hopes and dreams that had nothing to do with her children – and everything to do with the life that she wanted to lead once her children were grown. Instead, it was a dialogue between her and her God – the God who knew her and loved her -- and that love sustained her when her children grew up and made their own lives, at which she was no longer at the center of all their decisions and wants and needs. The reflection turned inward – towards the purposeful paradox that lingers at the heart of all of our longing: we are afraid to be fully known, for to do so would reveal our secrets, flaws and failings; and we want to be fully known, for it is only then that we can accept those same secrets, flaws and failings. Only then, can we come to see ourselves through a mirror not darkly but plainly, as a perfectly imperfect creation.

I never had children of my own but have been so fortunate to have a stepdaughter in my life whom I adore and respect; and two GrandTwins, age five. Until I had grandchildren, I truly had no idea of how much work parenting is. It's so constant; so demanding, and, sandwiched in between moments of sheer delight and exhilaration, are times of frustration, anger, exhaustion and boredom! So, the Mother Lode, referenced in today's sermon title refers to two aspects of mothering.

One references a mining term; the mother lode is a vein of gold or silver found in great abundance, but as a resource, it is not inexhaustible! You can mine that vein until it's completely tapped out!

And that's where the second meaning of the title serves as a challenge to all of us; whether we are parents or grandparents; seniors, youth, young adults, we can be on the alert for ways to support those who are actively parenting. We can take the load off for even a little while; through an offer of babysitting, volunteering for Religious Education at church, offering a parent's night out at church – where we watch your kids and the parents get to go out and be adults for a while – there are many possibilities for us to well, take a load off fannie and put the load on us – for even a little while! And with that, I'm going to invite Shawn and (name here) to lead us in our closing song/anthem, a song written by Robbie Robertson called "The Weight." Shawn/name – take it away!