

EA: Face of God

OK, so I have to say I am pretty excited about our Fall Faith series. I know, I am easily amused. And enthusiastic about a lot of spiritual stuff and sometimes it moves you and sometimes, not so much. This series is based on a book that God made so obvious to me, it was hard to avoid it. I had been looking at books last spring for a fall faith series. I read a couple and nothing was really resonating. So one day I'm at Barnes & Noble and in the front window they have this big display of book with what looks like colored confetti on the cover. It is called, "Everybody Always". I have no idea what that is about. Bob Goff is the author. Never heard of him. In the bookstore I wandered around. There are like 5 displays of this book plus the back window display. Hardback, paperback, they were everywhere I turned. I got close enough to read the subtitle, "Becoming love in a world full of setbacks and difficult people." I'm curious. Barnes & Noble carries Cheesecake Factory cheesecake slices and I'll admit, I have a weakness. I bought a cup of tea and a piece of cheesecake and read the first chapter, which is titled, "Creepy People". This is not a metaphysical or theological book. It is a book about becoming love in the real world. I like Bob because, well, he's a lawyer on a mission from God. I can relate. If you want to read the book, I highly recommend it. It is easy to read and Bob has some astonishing stories, some of which I'll be sharing. Somewhere in the bites of white chocolate raspberry cheesecake and a delightful cup of tea I was hooked on the simple and transformational power of becoming love. If you read the book, as I did, you need to be able to move past some of the more evangelical sounding phrases. No matter how you say it, love is the answer. It's true, Unity doesn't view Jesus as our savior but rather our brother and master teacher. The teachings and life of Jesus are central to both the book and Unity teachings so there is our common ground.

In chapter 13 of John, Jesus is nearing the end of his ministry. He's washed the feet of the disciples. And he says, " 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Jesus doesn't say, "If you convert a bunch of people" or "If you live a perfect life" or "If you make a lot of money and are successful" as the criteria for being known as a follower. He says, "They will know you by your love." How are we known in the world? How are you known in the world?

Unity teaches us that there is a spark of the divine within each one of us. The same essence of pure love—the same seed of infinite potential lies within each of us. The first commandment Jesus gave when asked about the greatest commandment was “Love God”. The second commandment is really just an expansion of love God, “Love your neighbor as yourself”. Love God in you and in your neighbor. Loving God is kind of abstract so it is easier to pass as loving God. “**Of course** I love God” trips easily from our lips. We can say it and no one really questions it and rarely does anyone ask for evidence? There is no “I Love God” ID that you have to register and provide proof to get. After “Love God” the commandments get trickier. After that we have to have some demonstrations visible in the world. Can we look in the mirror and see God? Can we love ourselves as an expression of the Divine Essence? Well what does that evidence look like? Does loving ourselves show up in self-care; in confidence; in living authentically? I’m not so sure that is what others see when they look at my life. What about you? What is the evidence that you love God expressing as you?

Can we look at others and see God? Can we look at **everybody, all the time** and see an expression of the Divine Essence? I know the answer for me. No. I suspect that is the answer for all of us. No. I don’t see everybody, all the time as an expression of the Divine Essence. One way I make that work for me and keep my **un-loving** off my radar is to avoid a whole bunch of people. Avoidance is a great tool to keep my ego mind calm and maintain the appearance of peace. Close your eyes and take a breath. See how easy that is. Peace. Love. Right where I am. And if I can stay in my comfort zone, I love everybody around me. I just don’t go where people are that are not in my “everybody” category.

Avoidance is NOT a great tool for spiritual growth. Avoidance is not what Jesus practiced. In my experience, avoidance is not what the Universe supports. The Universe is **for us** and wants us to grow into fuller expressions of the divine nature we are. So if we nestle into our comfort zones, feeling smug in our peaceful love, the Universe will drag someone into our zone. People come to our church or get hired to work with us or marry into our families and proceed to present a challenge. Everybody Always looms in front of us as the very thing we were hoping to avoid—loving someone we judge as unworthy of our love. Someone in conflict with us or presenting actions we don’t like or looking and acting so different we are uncomfortable. What do we do? First, we look for the fine print. Surely somewhere in Jesus’ sayings there is a loophole. Love your enemies. Love your neighbor.

Forgive. Make peace on the way to the courthouse. Before you pray, before you go to the alter, forgive. Now where is that loophole?

In fact, not only did Jesus not give us a loophole, Jesus sought out the very people we avoid. So whether we encounter the unlovable being drug into our comfort zone and disrupting our peace or we set out to intentionally challenge our comfort zone and strengthen our love muscles, our orders are the same: Love them. See them as human expressions of the same divinity that dwells in you. One of the groups Jesus sought out were the lepers. In ancient times, the disease was considered very contagious and affected individuals were isolated to avoid contact with healthy people. Jesus touched them with healing touch. With compassion and love, he sought them out. He taught in the temples and talked to the Pharisees and Sadducees—who didn't agree with him. He held out Samaritans as living the teachings of love. He regarded women and tax collectors with respect and equanimity. So who are the lepers we try to avoid? I'll be brave and I'll give you my list: White supremacists and racial haters; haters who believe they are superior to and entitled to advantages over other people with any number of characteristics—ethnicity, gender, gender identification, sexual orientation, disability, immigration status; people who abuse—people or animals; people who are against universal access to healthcare and quality education; people who are against environmental protections; people who don't think we need gun control; people who trophy hunt and kill exotic animals for sport. The list is probably longer if we had more time. I do not seek them out. The Universe has drug them into my zone more than once. Brené Brown says to get up close—which makes separation harder. The Universe has brought them up close on more than one occasion. And I discover—they are human expressions of the same divine essence as me. Different flaws and different stories and different responses than I identify with often. Yet here I am with my flaws and my stories and my responses they don't like. I love them in the agape, unconditional love kind of way.

In the book, Goff's stories are almost fantasy like. The details make me believe they are true. This is probably the most extraordinary of the stretches Goff makes in loving those we'd avoid. It's kind of long but you need all the details for the context of the ending.

Bob's son-in-law is an engineer who has worked in Africa for some years. In 2001 Goff went to Uganda and wondered if he could be of service to those in this country. He's a lawyer so he went to the courthouse in Mozambique.

Goff has a weird Spirit guided homing system so he went to the office guarded by the most men with machine guns. They were trying political opponents of the current president at the time. The receptionist in the office asked if he had an appointment. He said no but he'd come 18,000 miles. When he went into the office he had practiced the traditional greeting, "My lord". It went against his experience but it won him an audience. He offered his services as a lawyer and said his only qualifications were that he "loved justice and people" and he wanted to find a place he could help. The two exchanged talk about families and the civil war that had ravaged Uganda and left courts closed in the northern region for more than a decade. At the end of the meeting, Goff takes his house key off his keyring and offers it to the judge, inviting the judge to visit him in California anytime. As it turns out, Goff had befriended the Chief Justice of the Ugandan Supreme Court. After further visits, several years later the Chief Justice did visit California and Bob Goff. They talked about a serious problem that sounds almost absurd to us. More than a thousand children are abducted by witch doctors in Uganda every year. They believe the head or blood or private parts have magical powers. Not one witch doctor had ever been prosecuted because the children do not survive and there are no witnesses. Bob asked if he could be a part of a trial against a witch doctor if there was ever a surviving victim. The judge said ok. One day Bob got the call about Charlie.

Charlie, an eight year old boy, had been abducted walking home from school, his private parts cut off and left for dead. But he didn't die. He knew his abductor, Kabi. Kabi was head of all the witch doctors in his region in northern Uganda. Goff describes him this way: "He was my age and had no hair on his head, no stubble on his face and no smile. It was like all the hate in his life had congregated on his face. It was worn and stern, and his blood-shot eyes had a yellowish hue. Kabi was the most evil person I've ever met."

The trial was videotaped because a witch doctor had never stood trial and they wanted to record what happened. Bob supported Charlie, telling him the powerful words spoken by angels in the Bible: Be Not Afraid. Charlie was brave and the witch doctor was convicted. Life in prison. Word went out to 41 million people and a four foot boy changed Uganda forever. There is more to Bob's story with Charlie but there is also more to Bob's story with Kabi. He began to wonder about Kabi and not only was Charlie's bravery a teacher, Kabi became Bob's teacher. Bob was reminded we must love our enemy. Kabi felt distant and dark, definitely like an enemy.

Bob was reminded of passages in the Bible promising that nothing we have done can separate us from God. Kabi could not be separated from God. Separation is an illusion of our own mind. Bob felt nudged to explore moving beyond the illusion of separation between himself and Kabi. Kabi was in a prison called Luzira. Designed in 1920 for 200 inmates, it houses 3,000 men. Bob asked to see Kabi and was initially told no. Bob said he was the honorary counsel of Uganda and he was in. Kabi entered the room wearing a torn and dirty prison uniform. And then he stunned Bob. Kabi knelt and said how bad he felt about what he had done to Charlie. Kabi said, "I know I'm going to die in here. What I really need is forgiveness."

Bob had grown to love Charlie and here was the enemy who had mutilated a little boy and left him for dead. "No! No forgiveness," part of him cried. Then Bob imagined that Kabi was one of the criminals hanging on the cross next to Jesus. Not a scene we in Unity refer to very much but symbolic of pivotal decision places in our lives. Jesus says to the criminal "you will be with me in paradise". Just like that. Not a rehabilitation program or series of questions about his faith and beliefs. Boom. Love. Bob stayed and talked with Kabi about their families and what they value. Kabi said he wanted to know more about Jesus and faith. Rather than get caught up in our judgments about salvation theories and traditions different than our own, I'd like to just focus on the transformational power of love. Love changes lives. Bob says, "What Kabi and I are both learning about love, grace and forgiveness is that none of us needs to fully understand it to fully receive it."

Pretty out there story. American lawyer convicts Ugandan witch doctor and then befriends him in prison, while supporting the child victim. Most of us don't have the financial resources to be jetting around the world changing lives. But it does make me ask, What are we doing with the resources we do have? What are we doing with the love that we have right here in the Lehigh Valley? Who do we avoid so we can more comfortably say, "Yes I see the Face of God in others"? I'm guessing a whole lot of the people we avoid aren't in Uganda.

So here is your practice exercise for this week. I am serious about us becoming fuller expressions of love. This world needs more love. We need to free the potential within us. We need to move beyond stagnation to a place of dynamic love and acceptance. This can be a transformational time for our ministry. I am not asking for giant leaps. I am inviting us to take some baby steps in the direction of becoming love.

So go out into the community to a place where you can engage with people outside your comfort zone. Where are people you avoid? For me, I have sat in the Dunkin Donuts that is in the American Plaza on Hamilton; I have sat outside the PPL building in downtown Allentown; I do this at airports; I might try sitting outside a gun shop. Center yourself. Close your eyes and move your attention to your heart space. Think of someone you love very much. Feel the love. Open your eyes. Send love to people around you. You might notice judgments coming up, send love anyway. Imagine for a moment, Jesus is sitting beside you. As your ego mind questions, “That one? Really, that one too”, imagine hearing Spirit softly say, “Yep, that one’s my child too. Love your family just as I love you—unconditionally, warts and flaws and all.”

At the end of the chapter titled Creepy People, Goff says, “We need to love everybody, always. Jesus never said doing these things would be easy. He just said it would work.” Let’s try it.