

MAYFLOWER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
3901 NORTHWEST 63RD STREET
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73116
DR. ROBIN R. MEYERS, SENIOR MINISTER
405-842-8897
cyasunday@mayflowerucc.org
www.mayflowerucc.org
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"The Time Before Death"
Radio 11/1/09
Kabir

LONGING FOR THE GUEST

One of the remarkable things about reading poetry is to discover how little things have changed about the human condition over the centuries. In one way or another, we have always been in search of salvation, if we could just figure out what that means. In one way or another, we have always been in search of truth, if someone could just define it for us. In one way or another, we have always been looking for what the sixteenth century Indian poet Kabir called "the Guest," the "Teacher," the "Great Sound." Just don't wait until you are dead.

Kabir was born the child of a Muslim family of weavers, but was drawn to the holy river Ganges where he lay in wait for Ramananda, the Hindu saint of the day. So from the beginning he was breaking the rules. A Muslim was not considered qualified to receive the teachings of Ramananda, but Kabir waited at the spot where he took his daily bath. When the great teacher arrived, he stuck out his foot and the guru tripped over it, crying out "Ram." Kabir took this as his initiation, and declared himself to be Ramananda's disciple. Both Muslims and Hindus were outraged.

Muslims and Hindus in India — bitter enemies to this day — and yet Kabir would not be limited to either tradition. He drew from the mystical tradition of the Sufis, and from the devotional practices of Hinduism. This made everyone think that he was confused, of course. Much like Gandhi, who, when asked if he was a Christian, a Muslim, a Jew, a Hindu, or a follower of some other god said, "yes."

Kabir refused to recognize the caste distinctions of Indian society, nor did he believe in the prescribed states of Hindu life, and none of its six systems of philosophy. Any religion without genuine personal devotion was worthless to

him. True religion was found in the heart, and it knows no national or cultural boundaries. So both Muslims and Hindus flocked to hear him teach, and wisdom was transmitted for Kabir not through a text, but orally through his ecstatic songs and poems.

He knew that for people to be able to remember, they needed simple poetry. Not high-browed texts, but phrases they could remember and repeat. We know how this works. The TV jingle writer Vic Mizzy just died at 93. And who is Vic Mizzy? He wrote the theme songs for the Adams Family and Green Acres.

If you are my age or older, the lines will all come back. "Farm livin' is the life for me/Land spreadin' out so far and wide/Keep Manhattan just give me that countryside. New York is where I'd rather stay/I get allergic smelling hay/I just adore a penthouse view/Dah-ling I love you but give me Park Avenue . . .The chores/The stores/Fresh air/Time's Square. You are my wife/ Goodbye city life/Green Acres we are there. "

As for the Addams Family, all you had to remember was the finger snap. . .There is a part of the brain that stores music and rhyme and it can be recovered so easily. Kabir wanted people to remember the things he taught, and so he sang and wrote poetry that could be memorized and repeated.

He also loved to confound religious traditions by deliberately challenging long-held assumptions. For Hindus of his day, if one died at the city of Benares, one would go straight to the Lord. Those who die at Maghar, however, would be reborn as asses. So Kabir, just to prove a point, went off to die at Maghar.

Muslims wanted to bury his body and Hindus wanted to cremate it. But the story goes that Kabir appeared to the crowd and commanded them to lift the shroud that was over his body. When they did so, they found nothing but a heap of flowers. So guess what the faithful did? The Hindus took half the flowers and cremated them at Benares. The Muslims buried the rest at Maghar - where his tomb is now to be found at the monastery of the order his followers established. They can be found all over northern India.

In his masterpiece, "The Time Before Death" Kabir reminds us of perhaps the most enduring truth of the ages: don't live as if your life is a rehearsal for the real thing. It is the real thing. Don't have your eyes cast far off, waiting for some salvation in the sweet by and by. Open you heart now to receive the "Guest." And who is the Guest?

In the monasteries founded on the teachings of Kabir, there are no sculptures of deities, no idols to be worshipped, no pujas (devotions) to be performed. In the center of the monastery there is an open space with an empty “plinth” (a base, or platform on which a column, pedestal, statue, monument or statue rests). For Kabir, God cannot be confined to the forms of a particular religion. The Guest is therefore different for each person. Perhaps in fact, the Guest was the True Self that we all spend our life looking for, and few of us ever find.

We spend our lives trying to fill up emptiness — empty space with stuff, empty time with activities, empty lives with accomplishments. But what we ought to be doing, says the poet, is holding open empty space for the Guest. This was exactly the definition of the spiritual life offered by the modern theologian and poet Henri Nouwen. He said that the spiritual life is made possible by “holding open empty space.” Grace, by definition, can only fill empty space — so if you are so busy making a life that there is no vacancy in the hotel of your heart, then the Guest will pass you by.

He makes it clear from the poem’s opening line: jump into existence while you are alive! Don’t wait for salvation in another life. Be saved from yourself in this one. Salvation comes moment by moment; it is not something we get because we “believe” things that others have taught. The virgin birth? They were a dime a dozen in the time of Jesus. The Trinity? It was the church fathers’ answer to an argument about the nature of the divinity of Jesus and a way to try to avoid being charged with polytheism. And yet in Luke Jesus says, “Why do you judge for yourselves what is right?”

Don’t just think about the experience of your life; fall into it. Or as Kabir puts it, If you don’t break your ropes while you’re alive,/do you think/ghosts will do it after?

And what are these ropes that bind us? In fact they are remarkably similar for all of us. They are illusions about what we were supposed to do to “prove” to someone else that we are worthy when in fact each one of us is already worthy. They are some standard of living that will impress the neighbors, make your friends envious, or land you on the society page of the paper. They are some “look” that you have seen advertised as ideal — some better body type, some shinier, glossier version of you that will turn heads, or at least keep you in the hunt.

When I woke up last Sunday morning in Phoenix and got ready to go to Shadow Rock UCC church to preach, I turned on the TV, which was my first mistake, and every single ad was for a quick fix for something. Every ad was

for a magic bullet — a pill, a piece of exercise equipment, a sure-fire way to make money in real estate with no money down. We prey upon the human insecurities by making promises that can't be kept in order to maintain illusions that are deadly.

Religion does it too. Believe these doctrines and you can cash in on heaven; you will be saved; you will be healed; you will be happy. Nobody is telling us to hold open empty space, and look for the Guest. In a capitalistic society, everything is a transaction. Do this/get that. Don't do this/go without that. Go without this or that/you are a failure.

If you want to hear the futility of what I call "transactional" religion put with devastating clarity, just listen to this: The idea that the soul will rejoin with the ecstatic/just because the body is rotten — that is all fantasy. What is found now is found then. If you find nothing now, you will simply end up with an apartment in the City of Death.

Nothing, says Kabir, but a heart on fire will get you through the pearly gates, and they are ready to receive you now, not later.

Now I know what you are thinking. But Robin, I'm not a poet, I'm not a mystic, I'm not a whirling dervish, I'm just a mid-level manager in a retail business in Oklahoma City and I'm worried about the economy, and my kids, and what the doctor might tell me the next time I go in for a visit. My heart isn't on fire; I just want it to keep ticking!

Don't be so sure that it isn't at least smoldering beneath the routines of your daily life. Sometimes, when you stir a campfire that seems almost cold, you will uncover a few embers and the whole thing will burst back to life. It can happen when you turn and see a Chinese maple just now, on fire with dying leaves. It can happen when you are embraced by a friend and you are reminded that you live in someone else's heart. It can happen at a U-2 concert, as easily as when you are at the Civic Center. It's when you feel alive that the Guest comes to visit. If you leave the door ajar, a glass of water by the bed, and stop trying to make everything happen in your life—there will be what the Bible calls a "visitation."

On the walk to Emmaus after the crucifixion of Jesus, those two unnamed disciples are not planning to encounter the risen Lord. They are just walking (which is, of course, a deeply spiritual activity). And what happens? They meet a stranger, and then they invite the stranger to stay, and then they break bread — and how do they describe what happens? "Were not our hearts burning

within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

And who is this stranger? In the Christian story it is the Lord. But in every tradition, it is the Guest. The visitor comes now, but only if you have a longing for the truth, for the Teacher, for what Kabir calls the Great Sound. And here is the line that says it all when it comes to the afterlife: If you make love with the divine now, in the next life you will have the face of satisfied desire.

Not exactly a Baptist idea! Make love to the divine now, and you will experience the next life as a kind of afterglow. I think this might even involve dancing!

And notice it is not the product of doctrinal commerce. You can't trade anything for it. You can only, as Tom Bodet likes to say in advertising for the Motel Six chain, “leave the light on.” You can only loosen the ropes that bind us all and keep us fearful and only half alive. You can only let your defense fall away and recognize that you cannot finally keep chaos at bay; you cannot make the world or anyone in it, into exactly what it is you want them to be. You can only make room for the Guest.

The non-negotiable, however, is always desire. It is the intensity of the longing for the Guest that does all the work. Do you hear the subtle difference here between what Kabir calls longing and what we call ambition? To “long” for something is not to think that it can be seized and wrestled to the ground. But rather that to receive anything is a coefficient of our desire to receive it. Not because we have grabbed it by the throat but because we have loosened our own collar and given up the idea that a visitation can be prearranged, like a funeral or a five day cruise. Because if visitations can be made to happen, then they are no longer visitations – they are fee-for-service packages.

Notice how a waiter in very expensive restaurants will dote on the one who will pay the bill? Does this mean that he cares? Notice how a man who wants to conquer a beautiful woman pretends to be a lover of fine wine and fine music and not just a lover of football and beer. Does this mean that the Guest has come? Or look at the places where you can go to hunt big game animals that have been rounded up and fenced in and you can step out of your Range Rover and make the kill and go home with the trophy. Does that make you a hunter?

The first three hundred years of the church was a remarkable time for trusting in visitations. People in small, unorganized communities shared a meal, the spirit of Jesus, and a belief that God was on the side of love, not of

empire. Then we turned these places of the Guest into houses of Belief, and for the next 1,500 years we told people that you could “believe” your way into heaven.

Some people revolted, of course, and said you can’t turn the Guest into a product. And so we burned them at the stake.

And now something else is happening. Now the spirit that disassembles and reassembles us is making a mess out of orthodoxy again. We are all becoming heretics, because the word itself comes from a Greek word that only means “to choose” — to choose our path, and to seek the truth apart from the narrow confines of the religious racketeers.

Henry Ford is famous for having said, about the first mass-produced automobiles: “You can have it in any color you want, as long as it’s black.” The church has too often given us a similar message. You can get to heaven, as long as you chose to believe the only available choice!

And meanwhile, the Great Sound is humming away for all those who can get themselves quieted down enough to hear it. We hear it in the singing bowl as well as in the harmony of the choir. We feel it in the prayers of the people and in the communion of the saints — but only if we go looking for it with an intensity that can leave us as vulnerable as a hitchhiker by the side of the road.

The Guest does not come when we act out in ways that are compulsive and self-destructive. The Guest does not come after the face-lift or the tummy tuck. The Guest does not come in the flush of a new love or in the secret scandal of an affair. The Guest does not come after an initial public offering and the making of millions.

The Guest comes when one is looking for, and longing for, and making room for the Guest. And when it happens and when we turn and are startled by this presence, we should not say, “Where have you been?” or “What took you so long?” but rather, “Where have I been all this time, busy with everything except making room for you?”

Stay as long as you like. I’ve really been missing you . . . and me.

THE TIME BEFORE DEATH

by Kabir (Version by Robert Bly)

Friend, hope for the Guest while you are alive.

Jump into experience while you are alive!

Think . . . and think . . . while you are alive.

What you call “salvation” belongs to the time
before death.

If you don't break your ropes while you're alive,
do you think
ghosts will do it after?

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The idea that the soul will rejoin with the ecstatic
just because the body is rotten –
that is all fantasy.

What is found now is found then.

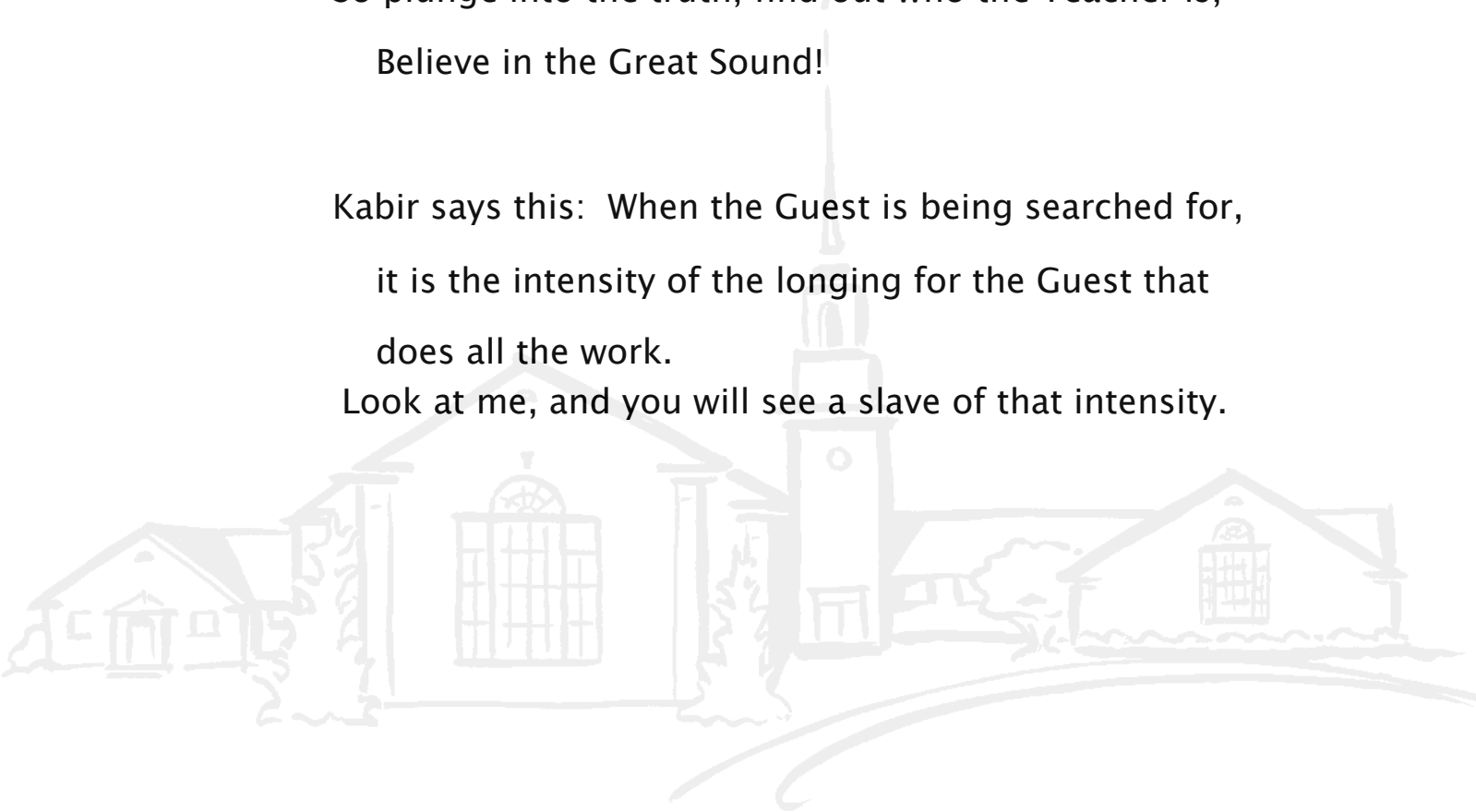
If you find nothing now,
you will simply end up with an apartment in the
City of Death.

If you make love with the divine now, in the next

life you will have the face of satisfied desire.

So plunge into the truth, find out who the Teacher is,
Believe in the Great Sound!

Kabir says this: When the Guest is being searched for,
it is the intensity of the longing for the Guest that
does all the work.
Look at me, and you will see a slave of that intensity.



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