

**CLEAR, DEAR, NEAR**  
*Sermon for Pentecost 18—Num 11, Mark 9:38-50*  
LPC, 9/27/15

Last week, at the 10:00 service before the sermon, we sang Hymn 654, which I invite you to look at now. The words to the single verse are very simple: “Day by day, O Lord, of thee three things I pray: to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day.” We sang this every Sunday at the church I came from. The words, as you can see at the bottom of the page, are attributed to Richard of Chichester, who lived in the thirteenth century, though they were almost certainly coined by a later English translator who came up with that really catchy rhyme of clearly, dearly and nearly.

The rhyme certainly has stayed with me over the past week, and comes to mind as I read and hear this week’s lessons. However, truth be told, the aspect of those three concepts, clear, dear and near, that suggests itself from this week’s readings, is how elusive clearness, dearness and nearness can be. Specifically, sometimes things that seem clear to us turn out to be not so clear. Sometimes things are dearer to us than they ought to be, while things we undervalue should be dearer than they are. And sometimes things, or more usually people, are nearer to us than we think.

Thus I am moved to preach a sermon reflecting on what is clear to us, what is dear to us and what is near to us.

We all have things we take for granted: things that are clear to us. It’s also apparent that what is clear to one person may be debatable, at best, to another person. I have two cousins in Massachusetts who are Facebook friends of mine. I love both these people. They were kind to me when my father died, and one of them in particular has been attentive to my mother in her old age. But from their Facebook posts it appears my cousins and I don’t see eye to eye on everything. There are some things that are clear to them that are not at all clear to me.

Now I can react to this in various ways. I could counter with heated Facebook posts of my own. Or I can make allowances for them, knowing that they have had experiences and influences that have produced their skewed views. Or, I can consider what things I myself consider self-evident, and reflect that here are two people at least to whom what is clear to me is not so clear. What is clear to me may in fact be as relative as what is clear to my cousins. Allowing for this is the hardest option, because it causes me to question certain attitudes I hold dear. It is also the biblical option.

In today’s Old Testament lesson, it is clear to the young man in the story, and to Joshua, that Eldad and Medad are not prophesying the right way. They were not prophesying at the tent of meeting as the Lord God had directed, but were prophesying in the camp. Clearly, Eldad and Medad were in the wrong, weren’t they?

Moses says they aren’t. The important thing, it turns out, is not that the elders prophesy at the tent, but that people receive and communicate the spirit of God. What was clear to the young man and to Joshua turns out to be relative.

A parallel incident happens in the Gospel lesson, where the disciple John catches someone casting out demons who is not of Jesus' entourage. It's clear to John that this person cannot be of God for that reason. Like Moses, Jesus points out that doing the work of God is what is important. The particular conditions of this work are not important.

Joshua in the Old Testament and John in the New have good intentions, but what is clear to them only points up the differences between how humans see things, and how God sees things.

What is dear to us? There are many things we hold dear. Some of the things we hold dearest have to do with our religion: the way we worship for example. This was no less true in Jesus' day than it is today. But Jesus had harsh words for people whose dearly held religious beliefs distanced them from their duty to their fellow human beings. In this context Jesus delivers today's gruesome sermon about cutting off limbs or plucking out eyes to avoid sinning.

As I've said before, this passage is intended in as hyperbole or figurative language. What it means is that everything that is dear to us needs to be questioned against the commandment that we love God and love one another. Even our dearest beliefs need to be cut off if they keep us from ministering to Jesus' "little ones." Incidentally, Jesus is not just talking about children here. In the context of his other teaching, some of which we read last week, Jesus' concern is for the people who are held to be of no account. If our religious beliefs and practices, dear as they are, cause us to neglect or distance ourselves from other human beings, whom God also loves, they need to be cut off and thrown away.

Some things are dearer to us than they ought to be. What must be dearest to us as followers of Jesus is the love of God and love of our fellow human beings, no matter how "little" they are in our sight.

What is near to us? Our clothing, certainly; our possessions; our families and those we love. Also our concerns, our responsibilities, our worries, our aches and pains: all those things that never leave our awareness for long.

James' letter suggests something else that is near to us, though we may not always realize it. James' letter emphasizes the connections between members of the church, and this connection is prayer: "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed." Jesus too speaks of our connections to one another: "Be at peace with one another." We human beings are in this together. Our neighbor is closer than we realize. Those we consider enemies are too.

Finally, lest we forget, God is near. God is as near as our own breath. Not for nothing does the book of Genesis tell us that it was the breath of God that became the breath of humankind. Whatever else we feel is near to us, God is nearer.

O God of thee three things I pray: that what is clear to you may be clear to me, that what is dear to you may be dear to me, and that I may stay as near to you, as you are ever to me.