

**SERMON, January 21, 2024**  
**First Presbyterian Church, Marshfield**  
**"A Pronoun Meditation"**  
**Dan Crump**

The second Scripture reading, one of my dad's favorites, is from John, chapter 14, verses 1-10, part of what is often called Jesus' farewell discourse, his attempt to get us, his thick-headed disciples, to understand that something big is about to happen:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled.  
Believe in God, believe also in me.  
In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.  
If it were not so, would I have told you  
that I go to prepare a place for you?  
And if I go and prepare a place for you,  
I will come again and will take you to myself,  
so that where I am, there you may be also.  
And you know the way to the place where I am going."  
**Thomas** said to him, "Lord, we do not know  
where you are going. How can we know the way?"  
Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life.  
No one comes to the Father except through me.  
If you know me, you will know my Father also.  
From now on, you do know him and have seen him."  
**Philip** said to him, "Lord, show us the Father,  
and we will be satisfied."  
Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time,  
Philip, and you still do not know me?  
Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.  
How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?  
Do you not believe that I am in the Father  
and the Father is in me?  
The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own;  
but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God within us, for the word of God among us.  
**Thanks be to God.**

This text from John is often read at funerals and is usually taken to refer to a heavenly home that awaits us after death. I will pass for now on the problems this -- I would suggest -- *misunderstanding* has unintentionally introduced, and hope that by the end of this meditation you will have an alternate reading to at least consider.

I have titled this message "a pronoun meditation." Not 'those' pronouns, the ones that people, especially young people, are courageously trying to use to free themselves from society's often oppressive expectations of gender. As someone who still bears the scars of those expectations myself, I am sympathetic to that cause, and I pray that we can eventually

create words that reflect a common truth, that heal rather than create further harm. But "this ain't about that."

Also, this ain't gonna be about Jonah. If you want a sermon on Jonah from me, go to the sermon archive on the church website, Aug 20 of last year. I'm done with that guy for a while.

One more disclaimer. I told Pastor Laurie a couple of weeks ago that I was cooking some thoughts and asked "when would my next potential pulpit date be?" She said April. Good, that should be enough time, I thought. So if this sounds a bit half-baked, would you be good enough to take it back home and cook it a bit longer for yourself?

I resolved this new year to try to put something like a smile on what are shaping up to be, as that old curse goes, "interesting times." Three 'sort of' affirmations presented themselves. The first is "It is perfect." Roll it around in your head for a minute and see what comes up. *\*it is perfect\**

Maybe the first thought is "perfect?, Is anything perfect? Do you even have a tv? There's this new thing called the internets. Give it a try." Stay with me. This is a pronoun meditation. "It is perfect." "It" is a kind of amazing word. Think about all the things "it" can stand in for. Anything we can see is an "it." Think about how many "its" are in this church, and then the church is another "it." Anything we can think of is an "it." "It" is cold out. "It" is warm inside. Coke ... is "it?" It is a wonder we haven't worn "it" out.

Now go really big. Pluto. "It" is no longer a planet. The Universe. "It" is still expanding. Okay, that's size. Let's do time. The Civil War. "It" could have been negotiated. Sorry. Couldn't resist. "It" all started with the Big Bang. "It" will all end someday.

Now imagine an "it" that never was. Don't hurt yourself, it's impossible. Imagine an "it" that had no part in this particular moment in time. An "it" anywhere that did not have a part in making "here" a thing. Imagine what would have to change for "it" to be something else, somewhere else. Imagine what "it" would take to change "it." You may have heard the expression, "It is what it is." Well, what else would "it" be? It is it. Seems obvious, but is "it"? I think I have sprained my air quote muscle.

Does perfection begin to come into focus? I don't mean supremely satisfactory. That's my new-found cannoli recipe. I mean complete, as in completely impossible to be something else. It is perfect. Every leaf on every tree. Every bird on every branch. Every ripple in every stream. Every diamond glint in every snowbank. Every argument and every opposing view. Every death, every birth. Every pain and every pleasure. One cannot exist without the other, without all the others. Maybe something like First Thessalonians 5:18 comes to mind, "give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

It is perfect. How could it not be?

The next affirmation ... "I am here." Feel into that one.

There is a torture device in Douglas Adam's, The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, called "The Total Perspective Vortex." When you are put into the Total Perspective Vortex, Adam's writes, you are given just one momentary glimpse of the entire unimaginable infinity of creation, and somewhere in it a tiny little marker, a microscopic dot on a microscopic dot, which says, "You are here."

The pronoun, "I," is in some ways the exact opposite of "it." Where "it" can stand for anything real or imagined anywhere in the universe, up to and including the universe itself, "I" stands for only one thing ... me. Some say "it" is infinite. Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig (Rosen-tsvaik), described "I" as not just finite, but infinitesimal, infinitely small. The vulnerability is infinite, as "I" both creates and is subject to every other "it," a finite part of the infinite whole. "I" clenches at comfort, pursues pleasure, and sidesteps suffering. "I" longs for justice, salvation, redemption. "I" fills the eternal now to the fullest with one eye on its birth and one eye on its final act. "I" is life itself.

Perhaps, "I am here" is a bit redundant. "I" is the very definition of "here." "I" locates every "it" with a beholding eye, instantly rendering anywhere a somewhere. The student calls across to the Zen master on the other side of the river, "How do I get to the other side?" The zen master calls across to the other side, "You are already there." "I" is not just the way, it is the starting point and the destination. "I" is where all of these happen. "I" is where where has any meaning at all.

I am here. Where else would I be?

I'd like to introduce the third affirmation with a story. My wife, Kamie, and I visited a game preserve in South Africa last fall. One day, the game vehicle was following a leopard walking by the strip of dirt that passes for a road. Leopards in this preserve are often a difficult and rare sighting. This was pretty special. A friend sharing the trip with us -- she was accustomed to empathic experiences, -- remarked that she felt a one-ness with the leopard going about its business, as if her "I" and the leopard's "I" had become one. The leopard offered no remark at all.

The next day, we were watching three lionesses and a big male lion. A male lion in the company of lionesses usually tends to be pretty intensely focused on both opportunity and real life-and-death danger. Three lionesses can take care of themselves very well. The big cats brushed past our vehicle close enough to touch. As the male padded past, barely three feet away, he locked eyes with our empathic friend. The photo she somehow snapped in that moment was 'nothing but face' around piercing eyes that saw nothing but her. Finding yourself in the gaze of an apex predator can be pretty life-changing. The feeling is not one of one-ness but of an overwhelming, gut-deep sense of other, a "you" that you will never be one with unless you are inside his belly.

The third affirmation? "You are with me."

"You" is a word like no other. Other words symbolize, represent, define. Other words create an abstract world that can be understood, used, experienced, known. "You" creates a bridge between two unfathomable mysteries. "I" surrenders itself and becomes "you" to another "I," and that "I" becomes "you" in return. In relationship, an "I" is always a "you" also. Feel into this. When I say "you," I open the door to your whole being, both the whole of what I already know about you, and the infinitely larger all that I do not. It is the ultimate welcome.

But not always. "You" can be spoken when "it" is meant, as when we assume we know all we need to know about the one we are addressing. "It" can be spoken when "you" is meant, as when we approach creation with a desire to both know and be known.

There are two parts to you. There is the one I think I know, and the one I can never even hope to. The first can and perhaps could, if I have earned your trust, become more complete; the second, always already complete, is filled with an infinity of surprises, an inexhaustible reservoir of unspoken truth yet to be revealed. When you are gone, I will still have the memory of you to cherish, the stories and jokes I now long to hear repeated, and repeated, but that other part becomes a holy of holies that I will never enter or hear from again, a boundless source of truth I can never again access. I can't help but think that that holiest of holy part of you shares something with that part of Jesus. Why else do we focus so much of our worship during Advent and Lent on a Christ who is not yet here, a Christ who was here but is now gone, a Christ who is now gone but who will one day come again? Jesus may say "I" am the Way and "I" am the Life. But he becomes the truth as "You."

As today's scripture has Jesus saying, "I go to prepare a place for 'You'." The funeral leaders don't ever seem to read a bit further. Verse 24 quotes Jesus, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will *come to them* and make our home *with them*." My Father's house is where you and I come together. It is perfect. I am here. You are with me. The gospel of John begins with the famous words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." For what it is worth, I think that Word was "you."

It is perfect.

I am here.

You are with me.