

As We are in God
Rev. John Allen

Hal Taussig was one of my New Testament professors in Seminary. A United Church of Christ Pastor, and well-regarded scholar of the historical Jesus. He is also a deeply spiritual person. And one of those people who has an almost mystic aura.

He is one of the most genuinely loving and caring people I have ever met in my life.

In one of his most memorable lectures to our Introduction to the New Testament course, he referenced this passage. Particularly the part where Jesus says, “I am in God, as you are in me, and I am in you.”

Those are Jesus’ words to his disciples, to remind them the depth of the union between God and each of us, and by extension, each of us and one another.

Hal then went on to share with us a spiritual practice of his.

See, he lived in Philadelphia, but taught in New York 2 days a week, so he spend a lot of time on Amtrak. Which means he spent a lot of time in Penn Station, and on the Uptown 1 train to 116th Street where our school was located.

He told us that in order to pass that time, he would look, as subtly as he could, at each person on the train, or each person in the waiting room at Penn Station. And repeat to himself.

“I am in you. As you are in me. As we are in God.”

Then the next person.

“I am in you. As you are in me. As we are in God.”

It is a stunningly simple, and undeniably beautiful practice. Looking at one person after another, and remembering his common humanity with them. Remembering that they shared with him in the mystery and beauty of life in God.

One day, he recalled, he was riding the Subway, and the car was so jam packed that he was barely hanging on to the bar, with his body twisted in a weird angle.

Nevertheless, with his normal practice, he was looking at each person in his field of vision, repeating his mantra to himself.

Then he got to a middle aged man standing at the end of the car. And the man was looking right back at him.

Their eyes met. And it was a little uncomfortable.

Then that man at the end of the car started mouthing some words.

At first, Hal says, I couldn't quite tell what he was trying to say. But suddenly it was unmistakable.

The man was mouthing the words: “I am in you. As you are in me. As we are in God.”

Hal was stunned.

It wasn't even his stop, but when he saw the man get off the train he pushed through the crowd onto the platform and found him.

Hal must have looked bewildered because the man just started laughing and said:

“I guess you don't remember me. I was in your New Testament class 10 years ago.”

“But,” the man added. “I don't want you to think I was just doing that for your benefit today. Ever since that lecture. I have been trying to remember to do that every time I get on the train.”

Pretty amazing.

And obviously that lecture had an impact on me too.

But I have to confess, whenever I am on the T, I tend to join the rest of the folks with my face buried in my phone.

It's funny. Usually I don't really even have anything to do on my phone, other than scroll past the same thing I have already seen on Facebook a few times.

Or read another article with a slightly different take on some story that I have already heard analyzed 1,000 times.

But I'll admit, it somehow seems preferable to looking around. There is something to me that feels oddly vulnerable about sitting in a subway car with my head up, looking around.

Let alone contemplating my one-ness with all my fellow passengers.

But every once and a while, like if my battery dies, I do it. And I have to say, it is always a revelation.

I look at people. I wonder about their lives. Or I say a prayer for them. I imagine what challenges they face? What they fear? What they hope for?

I always find it so meaningful. And yet so hard to sustain.

But it also makes me realize, that everything I so admire about my professor Hal, could easily be the outcome of this simple habit from his life. His genuine care and ease.

He spends a few hours a week simply meditating on his profound spiritual connection with complete strangers. How could he not be genuine in his care for those he knows well?

That is what Jesus is telling his disciples. He tells them that soon he will be gone. And yet they will not be alone.

He tells them that the people of the world might have a hard time seeing Christ's presence once his body has left the Earth.

But he says, you will know my presence. Because you know that just as I am in God, you will know that I am in each one of you.

In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. For you know that I am in you, and you are in me, as we together are in God.

So here is a little thought experiment for you.

Sit yourself down on a Subway car, and imagine it slowly filling with people. Imagine that you look at each one and affirm that you know, and feel deeply, that you share in common humanity.

That they are as deeply immersed in God's love as you are. That they are no less a child of God, than you.

The first few folks on the car are dear to you. Your inner circle. The people you love, and trust with your life.

Then some strangers, who seem nice enough.

Then a homeless man.

Then that distant cousin that you were fighting with on Facebook.

Then that person whose politics you think are just dead wrong.

Then someone who worships differently than you.

Then someone whose choices in life you just don't understand.

Then someone who wasn't born here.

And someone who speaks a different language.

What would your life be like, if you could look at each one of those people,
and say:

“I am in you. As you are in me. As we are in God.”

What would our world be like if we all could?

Look, you don't need me to tell you that there are big gulfs between a lot of people in our country right now, along all sorts of lines.

And am not naive enough to think that it would solve all our problems to hold hands and sing kumbayah.

But I am worried that too many of us are walking around on egg-shells, because we are not quite sure what to say, or where to start.

Or worse, we are burying our faces in our phones. Or looking at our feet.

Afraid to even make eye contact.

What if the place to start is just to look up, and begin to train yourself to see every other human you encounter for what they are, first and foremost.

Someone as deeply immersed in God's love as you are. A child of God.

It doesn't mean you have to like them. It doesn't mean you have to approve of, or support what they do.

But it is a baseline requirement of a Christian life that we all strive to truly see everyone's humanity.

One of my most vivid childhood memories happened when I was in fifth grade. I had gotten hurt during recess, and was walked in to the nurses office for an icepack.

I got what I needed, and I was sent to rejoin my class.

I don't know if I had ever been in the hallways of that school before without anyone else around. I was walking across this glass bridge that connected the two buildings in my elementary school and I looked out and saw all my classmates at recess.

Suddenly, like flash of light, it occurred to me, for the very first time, that each one of them was a person too. That they had lives as full as mine. They they had fears and hopes like I did. That each one of them saw the world through their own eyes. That each one of them was a conscious person. Just like me.

It so profound. And so immediate. That it felt like divine revelation.

Of course, it's an ordinary stage of human development. Something that we all figure out at some point. But in that moment it struck me especially powerfully.

And it strikes me now that it is a simple truth that it is so easy to lose contact with.

Something that is so easy to forget.

And In Jesus' words I hear a warning that when we begin to forget it, we might lose our capacity to encounter God.

So let's commit.

Phones away.

Prejudices aside.

Eyes up.

“I am in you. As you are in me. As we are in God.”