

“Because You Are Dear”
A sermon preached by Rev. Daniel Smith
At First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
Sunday, October 23, 2005

Text: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-9

During my senior year in college, I lived in an off-campus house with two friends who developed a special bond over the course of the year. Turns out they had both spent a substantial amount of time in Egypt. Randy, whose father worked for an international relief agency, went to high school in Cairo. He spoke a little Arabic. He had his high school graduation keg party at the Pyramids! Rob had just returned from a long trip to Northern Africa where he picked up a little Arabic too. At the time, I had yet to even cross the border to Canada. Well...soon after we all moved in together, these worldly roommates got into a habit of talking to each other in broken Arabic, or at least a few words of it before inevitably devolving into English with a strong Egyptian accent. For months, every other sentence they spoke to one another began with the Egyptian term of endearment, “Habibi”. “Habibi”, in Arabic, means “my darling”. “Habibi, do you want to catch movie tonight!” “Habibi, good class, yes?” They had a little brotherhood of the Egyptian accent going on. And eventually, they started calling me “habibi” too. It sounds silly, but it meant something to me when they did. We had grown to care about each other deeply, and we still do. Though we’d throw the phrase around our house with foolish accents, it was true. I *was* their darling – their darling friend, Dan. And they were my darlings. Who needs a fraternity? We had established a fraternal kind of love for one another. We had even found an albeit foreign language to express it! To this day, Randy and I still call each other Habibi. When I toasted him at his wedding a few years back, I told everyone that my dear, darling friend Randy had become for me nothing less than my brother from another mother.

I was reminded of my “habibi” Randy this week and also this Egyptian term of endearment when I was reading our passage for today from Paul’s Letter to the Thessalonians. It’s not an especially well known piece of Paul’s corpus and it doesn’t carry much theological weight. Maybe this is why I found myself focusing on Paul’s language, or at least a translation of it. He is writing to the church at Thessalonica. He is trying to offer them encouragement as they persevere in their new community and way of life, against Roman imperial opposition. At the time of his writing, he’s just come through a rough stretch in Philippi where he was unjustly jailed and beaten with Silas. The rumors have been flying. So he starts out our passage in a posture of self-defense, self-defense against those opponents of the Gospel who would accuse him of all matter of things: heresy, immorality, deception, trickery, you name it. The itinerant Paul was an outsider to every community, even to those early Christian churches he was helping to found and shape. He feels the need to reassert his integrity and to debunk any skepticism about his motives. But, once he reminds himself and his readers of his faith-filled and Christ centered relationship with them, his language shifts. Did you hear it? His self-defensive tone softens. He writes: “But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.” Let’s stop right there. Can you imagine someone these days addressing an entire group of people, some undoubtedly strangers, with such a profoundly intimate metaphor? Imagine a CEO using this kind of language in a corporate memo, or a school principle talking about his students with such affection. Paul

goes on: “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the Gospel but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.”

I’m not sure why I find this intimate language of commitment and community so striking but I haven’t been able to get it out of my head all week. As a result, I can honestly say it’s been softening me up, like that first time I heard my college friends call me “habibi!” I think I’ve been so moved because Paul uses these tender and gentle words not merely to address his pals, but an entire community of people, some of whom he surely would not have known. Really....Where in our lives do we get beyond our concerns with self-image or self-defense when addressing people outside our inner circles of family and friends? Where do we speak with such an intimate language of love and care to our fellow human beings? Where? Well, for starters at least, we do it here, at church.

William Sloane Coffin, former minister of Riverside Church in New York City, has said: “A church is a place where we try to think, speak, and act in God’s way, not in the way of a fear-filled world. A church is home for love, a home for brothers and sisters to dwell in unity, to rest and be healed, to let go their defenses and be free – free from worries, free from tension, free to laugh, free to cry.” The ever hard driving and prophetic Coffin would be the first to agree that this is not the only role of the church, but it’s certainly one of our central tasks. In our fear-filled world, we offer one another a community and also a distinctive language that gives people practice in sharing the kind of intimacy and tender hearted love that God offers and expects of each of us. We offer each other a space, and also the words, to be vulnerable with each other, to be real with each other, and to risk speaking a language of love and intimate commitment to one another. In so doing, we can be free to reach out from the depths of our broken and messy lives, in solidarity with and in genuine love for and needfulness of God, Christ and our neighbors. Outside of caring for our own, where else but church can we practice this language of community and of love for strangers? Where in our fear-filled world, can we be so soft? Where can we be so real?

I wonder how many of you know the story of “The Velveteen Rabbit”. Show of hands! Good. Well then you should remember that a good chunk of the book is a conversation between two stuffed animals. Here goes:

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in your joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

The Rabbit's question is our question: What is real? What is real in our lives? What is real about this community? What is real in the world? And the Skin Horse's answer is one that I hope we never forget. *To learn what is real is to learn over time how to be loved and how to be accepted at any given time, just as we are. Put another way, to learn what is real is to learn how to see the world through the ever loving and ever merciful eyes of God and Christ!* To put it still another way, to be made real is to hear these words of God from the prophet Isaiah in surround sound! *"You are precious in my sight and many splendored and I love you."* To be real is to know that you can never be ugly, except to people who don't understand.

In a few minutes, we'll be inviting a group of people forward. We'll be asking them if they would like to join our Covenant here at First Church in Cambridge. And, we'll be asking you all to call them your brothers and sisters. This tender language of love and family gives us a taste of what God has called us and of what we should be calling each other, even those outside of this community, outside of this Blue State, outside of this country. Here in this church, in this covenantal community, is where we learn and practice this counter-cultural language of love. So...when we ask you all to welcome these new members, even though and maybe especially because some are strangers to you, please do so with a tender heart and a caring voice. Do so as if yours was the only voice they would hear. We bind ourselves by these promises. We make our commitments to love and respect each other before God. Like Paul, we are promising to share not only the Gospel of God but also our very selves with one another. What's more, we are promising to make each other real! We do so because our shared faith reminds us that these new members of our community are already dear to us, and we to them. More than dear, we should become darlings to each other, darling brothers and sisters in faith! Habibis, my darling brothers and sisters in Christ, thanks be to God for offering us a language of intimate commitment, community and love. Amen.

