

# Ken Leinbach: Being from God, for God, and of God

Ken Leinbach – Draft of lay sermon given in Washington DC –  
11/6/1994

## Being from God, for God, and of God

**Introductory song:** Something You Can Do – Blair Pettyjohn

CHORUS:

Might not be much, maybe just a step or two  
Come on now brother, there's somethin' you can do  
Might not be much, maybe just a step or two  
Come on now sister, there's somethin' you can do

**Sermon Lectionary:** (Pentecost 25) [1 Kings 17:8-16](#), [Psalm 146](#),  
[Hebrews 9:24-28](#), [Mark 12:38-44](#)

Good morning! I have a difficult time talking about God, for God is not something to be confined to words, God is something that must be experienced. Let me share a quick story with you.

The man boarded the bus, lost in his own world. The smell of alcohol permeated his ratty coat. The lines on his face broadcast his sorrow. Every set of eyes on board stared curiously, yet the man never knew this, for no one dared look into his blood-shot eyes ... save one small creature. A bright eyed Mexican/American girl who's limited experience had never encountered such a man. He seated himself in the empty seats behind her embarrassed mother (a youngster in her own right). This little girl flashed her pearly whites in the man's direction in a way only children know how. At that moment the

man's life underwent a miraculous transformation. His eyes cleared, crinkled and twinkled. His slouched shoulders straightened. His matted hair seemed no longer angry as much a case of boyish neglect, despite its grayish tinge. The facial wrinkles all suddenly pointed towards the sky in a huge grin. From this he stuck his large tongue out in a friendly gesture of thanks. The girl's responding giggle was unfortunately misunderstood by the self-conscious mother. The rest of the ride the girl sneaked happy glances at this friendly comical creation that had entered her new life.

The man's desired destination arrived before his little friend. The Asian woman who was boarding, saw a smiling man in a ratty coat practically skipping off the bus. She failed to notice the small nose print on the window next to the bright-eyed Mexican/American girl aboard.

*He who binds to himself a joy  
Does the winged life destroy;  
But he who kisses the joy as it flies  
Lives in eternity's sun rise. William Blake*

I have claimed Church of the Savior as my spiritual community, and because of this claim, I believe you have claimed me and I feel that I belong [this in reference to recent sermons on belonging]. For this I thank you. While I admittedly do not follow the letter of the Church of the Savior Law (I've never been in a formal mission group, I don't journal daily, and could never call myself a biblical scholar or theologian – I'd much rather read Anne Tyler's fiction, or Jack London's adventures) – I do lead a spiritual life. My mission is most definitely, and intentionally my work with the environment and kids. I have a strong faith, and a very present relationship with God. And I am also disciplined with prayer (or nurturing my relationship with God). This may come as a surprise to my wife Shauna, as I don't set aside daily time to be with God – but I do keep God present with me throughout the day. I was taught as a child that when I got an owie, my first thought

should be "God is Love", before I asked for a Band-Aid. I still do this. I try to keep God present in my day to day activities – even the most mundane. It is from this (what I have termed my experiential Christianity) that I speak to you today.

It gives me the "Heebee Jeebees" to be here before you. I looked this word up in Webster's Collegiate Dictionary and was surprised at my findings.

*Heebee Jeebee: n, when the "web-weaving" wisdom challenges one to live on the boundary of what is safe, known, and secure in order to spin and weave a new reality. An experience which strikes the inner most core of ones soul, it sparks there, and slowly kindles fire which glows ever expansively until it dissipates the exterior shell which adult people have learned to wrap themselves in. Without the shell in the way the Heebee Jeebee experience radiates positive, contagious, energy. It feels very good, yet is made up in large part of vulnerability and fear. It can be nothing but honest. Commonly experienced when one falls in Love – especially with a woman named Shauna (it really said this!) and best expressed by young children when encountering a common day object (like a balloon, jack o lantern, falling yellow leaf, or a homeless man) for the first time. Heebee Jeebees are of, for, and from God.*

The man on the bus, the girl, and I (as an observer) all experienced a Heebee Jeebee.

Last week Hollis challenged us to tell real modern life stories of love. I would like to pick up on this challenge and weave together a series of stories (one of which you already heard) from my life's experience. In truth, I see Love with a capital "L" as a synonym for God, so what I really wish to do is weave together an image of Love, or weave together an image of God. In part this is a response to someone in this community (I don't recall who) that during confession stated how she wished to rid herself of the school master image of God which was learned in her Sunday school and church

experience. To me God is best described with stories and as we well know, in this I am not alone.

I once spent the day with a trout and was taught a lot about faith. Circumstances were such that I found myself with a free week in California following a wedding that I was in. So I hitchhiked to Sequoia National Park and decided to hike from there to Kings Canyon (the two parks border each other). Five wonderful days of complete solitude. The human side of me wants to tell of the adventure of the trip, of all the wild life witnessed and the mountains climbed and the snowy pass crossed – but it was the day spent with the trout that has the most spiritual relevance. In truth it was probably not a day, more like an afternoon. I had been hiking all morning on the third day. I hadn't seen a human during the entire time. I was in the groove – which is to say, my body was on auto pilot, the weight of the pack had seemed to disappear, my hunger and thirst were satisfied and my mind was floating in all sorts of wonderful directions. I was brought back to reality, when the trail abruptly ended in a fast moving stream. The bridge had been washed out, so off with boots, socks and pants – and into the bone chilling water I went. It was while sitting on a rock on the other side drying my legs and feet that I spotted the trout. It was a glorious creation, completely of, for and from God. It seemed to be an extension of the living river, perfectly adapted to its environment. At first it appeared motionless, suspended in the crystal clear water – but upon closer inspection one could notice subtle movement from the tail and fins which provided the illusion of stillness in the fast flowing current. The trout too had to be in the groove. I was entranced with the beauty – and my mind, body, and soul were in a place that I could take it in. We spent the better part of an hour together before either one of us moved. The trout launched out and up, snagged a drowning grass hopper caught in the current, and just as quick settled back into "moving motionlessness" a little further up the stream. I followed. The next victim was some aquatic insect which had

scrambled too slowly over the creek bed. And the next was a just hatched mayfly caught in the ever providing current. I watched this trout, and in one sense became this trout – looking for the next meal ever looking and following upstream. This trout lived by faith alone – sustenance will come – all will be provided for. From today's lectionary – "She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family . For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah."

Once the fish was fooled by the molt, or dead skin, of a caterpillar. She engulfed it, then quivered and shook and released the skin in parts out of it's gills. After this it seemed more watchful for a time, letting what appeared to be fine fare drift by before its next flurry of motion. This was not blind faith. The river of life sustains us – it is our task to be faithful, watchful, discriminating. God will fulfill our needs, it is our choice to give him/her the opportunity. The trout is from God, is of God, and lives for God.

Our Gospel story from Mark speaks of a widow who gave of all she had for the sake of her beliefs. It did not appear to be much of a material gift to those present and probably some judgment passed between the eyes of those who were about. Had you and I been there, we very well might have been among those passing subtle judgment. Until Jesus spoke it was a non event to all save the widow – but Jesus shared with us in that moment a glimpse of how God works. Until you know the whole story, passing judgment on an individual means nothing – and the only one with the whole story is God. The message I get is not to give up my life savings to the Church as a tabernacle of God, this is not my calling. What the widow teaches me is to base my actions exclusively upon my relationship with God, not upon the judgment from or for others.

This story really happened! It was a long time ago, and maybe

the facts have been shifted around a bit, but the life thread of this nameless widow has twined with mine and many , many other folk – and I think that is great. She did not give her up her life's savings to teach me or anyone else a lesson – she followed her heart, her soul's sense of what was right. She didn't do it for fame or recognition – her motives were pure love – they were from God. She was giving all she had in the only way she new how for God. In that moment of clarity, when she was moved to give it all up she was of God. She experienced a Heebie Jeebee. Jesus recognized this and now I am the beneficiary. Any action that follows this format has an incredible power behind it – not the kind of power that controls a situation, but the kind of power from which miracles are born .

As Blair sang – it might not be much, just a step of two, there is something you can do – and when that something you do is based in God's love there is no telling what little actions will impact the world or when the impact will occur. As Albert Schweitzer put it, "No ray of sunshine is ever lost, but the green which it awakens into existence needs time to sprout, and it is not always granted for the sower to see the harvest. All work that is worth anything is done in faith."

Ben ... Ben was one of the "wild ones" I had been warned about by the principal of Ashlawn Elementary School in preparation for their 5th grade overnight event to the Outdoor Lab. I see so many troubled kids though in the course of a year with Arlington's public school system, that his warnings washed right over me and I didn't bother to remember the names of the three "to watch out for". In retrospect this was probably good, as often I feel that ones expectations create a certain reality. Anyway, the Ben I met was indeed full of energy, throwing rocks into the pond the moment he stepped off the bus. I think he expected me (and maybe even wanted me) to yell at him for it – and normally I would have, but something stopped me, and instead I asked him if he knew how to skip

stones. We then proceeded to do it. When other kids arrived I made him stop, and later when I presented the group with the rule not to throw stones in the pond I winked at him. None of this was premeditated, and I hesitate to say that I was called to this action – but the action did occur – it was slightly out of the ordinary, and it had to come from somewhere. It wasn't a Heebee Jeebee event, but I do believe that it came from God. The net effect of this little action was that Ben liked me, and I liked Ben enough to remember his name (which for me, with the thousands of kids I see in a year is pretty good.) When ever we split into groups for activities or hikes, Ben somehow managed to get into my group. I didn't see the dark side of this active kid until we came upon a toad. His instinct was to grab a large rock and, as is often the case with kids his age, try to kill it. Fortunately I saw the toad and its impending doom in time to yell hey stop it! The rock was thrown, but my tone (from someone he liked) startled Ben just enough to change its trajectory. Once again I could have yelled at him, but something kept me from doing it. Instead I scooped up the toad **[scoop toad from container and show it to the congregation]**. I Stopped the group, and praised Ben for finding such an interesting critter, and asked him to name it as I planned to take it back to the Lab to set up an aquarium for it. When I picked it up. [squeeze toad's back a little and explain vocalization of males] The toad talked. This little instinctive sound completely unwound Ben. He forgot his role as "tough dude" for a minute and said with wonder. "I almost killed him!" The toad spoke to him somehow – or was it the toad doing the speaking. Heebee Jeebee!

He named the toad Ben Junior (of course). He helped me set up a home for Ben Jr. and filled out the Animal Find Form with great diligence. When he left the next day his last act was to say his good bye to his little pal.

This occurred early last spring. I would have forgotten this story, but right towards the end of school I received a call

from the same school principal. He told me about this kid who had come to the Lab and seemed to have gone through a seemingly miraculous transformation while out there. He was doing his schoolwork, he wasn't getting into as much trouble, and today he had marched into his office and said of his own initiative that he wanted to go to the Outdoor Lab for summer Camp and how could he do this. I immediately told the principal that we had been booked up for months, but something called me to add that if they could come up with the money, I'd find a way to squeeze him in. I did not realize that it was Ben until he arrived at camp.

I finish with this story, for I feel that it is a true testament of what Christianity is all about. I was present to Love with a capital "L" and listening with and for this kid. It would be easy to claim that I changed his life, but this is a ridiculous and dangerous, human generated, pride full thought. Number one, the kid has a long life to lead, and number two, my role in the scenario was from God, not God itself. If I had been in control of the situation, I would have yelled at the kid twice (once with the rock in the pond, and once with the rock aimed at the toad), and probably would have had a dead toad. No phone call from the principal would have resulted. It may be true that my openness allowed the right path to occur, but being open is the only power I possess – the real and true power comes from God – God of Love, God of Miracles. From today's Psalm – "God upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. He sets prisoners free. He gives sight to the blind. God lifts up those who are bowed down."

I, and the toad, and the widow, and the fish, and the man on the bus, and Hollis are somehow all woven together with Ben, and maybe now with you too a bit. We are all from God, and when we listen for God, we become of God. .

*Might not be much, maybe just a step or two  
Come on now brother, there's somethin' you can do*



*Might not be much, maybe just a step or two  
Come on now sister, there's somethin' you can do*

Amen.