

Surrender

The self says, I am; the heart says, I am less; the spirit says, you are nothing.

-Theodore Roethke

I meet with Brian on a regular basis for mentoring as I move through the Commissioned Pastor process with the Presbytery. Brian, again, ask if I was ready to deliver a sermon? Always having presented someone else's in work in front of an audience, my answer was the consistent, no! After all, I have never taken a class in homiletics. Yes, I have involved in several bible study classes, but never formally studied the books of the bible or taken Hebrew and Greek courses. What qualification do I have to deliver a sermon? Brian has a Doctorate in Homiletics. My PhD. Stands for Professional Hair Dresser! I explained to Brian, if he had asked me to deliver a presentation on Jesus' hair color, of course depending on which image one is viewing, and what highlights would best compliment His hair color along with His skin tone, give me an hour and a projection screen. For full disclosure, for the past forty years, I have been giving sermons and guidance behind a hydraulic chair to a congregation of one. I do have an advantage. I am wielding a sharp instrument and the congregant has no choice but to listen and agree. Twenty minutes explaining my interpretation of today's readings, terrifying! But, as those of us who have worked with Brian know, he can be quietly persistent and persuasive. Brian was looking at his calendar saying, "It is good you are frightened." as he scheduled me for today, the Sunday after Easter, Doubting Thomas Sunday.

Brian created a crash "Course in Homiletics" for me today, which begins with choosing a passage from today's readings that grabs my imagination, speaks to me." He advised me to have fun with it! Easier said than done. This being my first sermon, I also considered the advice of the Comedian George Burns, "The secret to a good sermon is to have a good beginning and good ending, and to have the two as close together as possible." Amen!

Traditionally the focus today is on the Apostle Thomas, called the twin. Thomas who was known for boldly encouraging of the other Disciples to travel with Jesus to Bethany, where they would likely encounter death. Thomas who upon seeing the risen Christ, transforms from skeptic to believer proclaiming, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28), one of the most powerful and direct witness’ for our belief that Jesus is fully God and fully man.

But the phrase I was continually drawn to, pertaining to something I have been experiencing preparing for this very moment, is a phrase describing powerlessness and fear, John 20:19, ‘the disciples were gathered behind locked doors afraid of Jewish authorities.’ The disciples had doubts based on the events of the previous few days, they had fear, they felt powerless. By their association with Jesus, they had good cause to believe the same fate would happen to them. Naturally, they retreated to the room where, previously, they experienced servant leadership when Jesus washed their feet. They experienced a loving friendship with Jesus at the last supper. They learned the gospel of love which soon they would spread to thousands of others. The Disciples had allowed their anxiety to create fear. As it has been my experience in times of woundedness, when all has been surrendered, all appears lost, Jesus, as the risen Christ, appears giving the Disciples “peace” and the grace of the Holy Spirit.

My favorite anacronym of fear comes from the motivational speaker Zig Ziglar. When motivational speakers became popular, in the mid-eighties, the salon where I was working embraced this concept of self-motivation to create success. The staff had to attend Dale Carnegie. Yes, to eliminate our fear of public speaking. Weekly, prior to class, my fellow co-worker/classmate and I eliminated our fear of public speaking by meeting at Walt Harper’s Jazz Club in Oxford Center, which, happened to include couple glasses of wine to “subdue” our anxiety. And then there was Zig Ziglar. Zig Ziglar had a Texas twang and sounded like a tent revivalist. Zig would use catchy rhythmic quotes and acronyms for his audience to remember strategic techniques for success. Zig Ziglar’s acronym for fear was, FEAR, F-E-A-R, false evidence appearing real, let me repeat that, false evidence appearing real. Fear often comes when one feels they have become powerless, have lost control of self and those around themselves.

Fear often leads to a need to strengthen one's grip on control, which can lead to erratic decision making and compulsive behavior.

We are conditioned to embrace the power of control and it is difficult to let it go and allow ourselves to give up self-control to the will of God, which would lead us to find our true selves and our true calling. Franciscan Richard Rohr introduces his book, "Falling Upward, unravelling the two halves of life", referencing the writings of Carl Jung. Richard begins with the importance in the first half of life of developing strong foundations, of self-identity, relationship, community, and security. Crossing over to the second half of life one begins challenging those boundaries, authority figures, and created self-image to discover what is one's true calling. Richard continues how we must go through the death of our created self, and a rebirth process to become our true selves, who we have always known we are. And as we see with the Disciples in today's Gospel, we must experience a traumatic life event, maybe several, to allow ourselves to give up self-control to the will of God to find our true calling. We often find these periods of chaos extremely uncomfortable and try to flee back to our contrived order, as we see with the Disciples returning to the comfort of the upper room. Later in this narrative, several try to return to their previous life of fishing. It is often a two-step forward, one step backwards process. Throughout the Bible and many other faith traditions we can find the concept of having to empty oneself of the created self, in order to have clarity of our faith, and who we are called to be within our faith. Allow the emptying our earthen vessel to allow the Holy Spirit to refill our vessel with the original will of God for us.

Several years ago, while recovering from an accident, Brian came for a Pastoral visit. During our conversation he ask me what I viewed as my largest obstacle to my faith. That answer was easy, fully trusting God's will. My need to control, my created self, had become a safe space for me. To use Melody Beattie's term, I am a classic co-dependent. I have had several periods in my life where I have found myself powerless and fearful: childhood traumas, struggling with my faith and sexuality, the end of a relationship, the loss of a job, and the unexpected loss of a parent. With a strong fear based need to control my outer image, I have often said God has to give me a strong nudge to make me clearly see his will for me. And God

has been quite patient with me! It was when I entered the rooms of Al-Anon, four years ago, and introduced to the twelve steps I finally had the blueprint to turn my complete trust and will over to God.

The twelve step programs have been called America's Spirituality. Anyone whom has experience the rooms of twelve steps, either through their own addiction recovery, as family members or friends of an addict, understand the concept of letting go, letting God. The term "hitting bottom" aptly describes the point one reaches when one has exhausted all their physical, mental, and spiritual energy. You have no choice but surrender the illusion of control, and of the created self, because you have become powerless. One fears they have lost everything that they think matters. In the first three steps, one admits they are powerless, the only path to sanity is through a higher power and then makes a conscious decision to turn ones will over to their higher power.

As we read in the Gospel today, it is in the darkness of that powerlessness, when we can no longer petition God, it is at the bottom, when God comes to us. The spiritual teacher, Ram Das said, "Something in you dies when you bear the unbearable. And it is only in that dark night of the soul that you are prepared to see as God sees and to love as God loves." This is what the Disciples experienced, in their powerlessness, the risen Christ came to them, returned them to sanity, and sent them forth with the grace of the holy spirit to spread and live the gospel of love. The Disciples no longer feared authorities and when challenged on spreading the Good News, responded, as we read in Acts5:29, "we must only obey God, not men."

The Disciples experienced the Gospel live. Beginning with surrendering to their calling, unafraid they gave up all their worldly possessions to follow a stranger. The Disciples spent three years living and travelling with Jesus. Jesus personally mentored the Disciples and gave them insight of his future and theirs. The Disciples witnessed many miracles, ate the finest food, drank the finest wines, and experienced the finest spa treatments. Yes, as a PhD. in the beauty industry, I would view the washing of feet and anointing of precious nard oil, "spa treatments"!

The Disciples watched Jesus cunningly challenged authority, both religious and in government. As they travelled the crowds continued to grow larger, they were hanging out with the cool people, the bohemians. They had been countlessly assured God was with them, God would provide for them, God would protect them, and God would always love them unconditionally giving them everlasting life. The Disciples experienced all the benefits of being with, the chosen one, the “Superstar”. Yet, when confronted about their association, they betrayed Jesus, denied Jesus, and most disappeared when Jesus was crucified, hiding frightened of what authorities might have in store for them. Their false sense of abandonment and of powerlessness were based in self-imposed fear and doubt as they lost sight of their faith and mission. It was in the quiet surrender of the Upper Room; the Disciples eyes were opened to love by grace, and they were able to fearlessly spread the Gospel they had experienced it.

As Christians, we have full knowledge of the gospel, yet we have difficulties practicing that gospel in everyday life. We randomly manipulate or ignore the Gospel to meet our own needs, avoid fears of association or appearing less than. I know I have. We have just complete Lent and Holy Week where we have witnessed the Paschal Mystery, which is not about dying but about dying to self. It reminds us that it is imperative that we surrender by allowing ourselves to fall through fear into love. We must learn to be alive through the love of others. Theresa of Calcutta calls us to live simply so others may simply live.

We live in a society that values power over service of others. The images of success are driven by the advertising industry and entertainment industry. An image of perceived power achieved through degrees, titles, address, associations, maintaining our youth, destinations, and how much we acquire. A society which values this type of materialistic power creates a society where ME becomes more important than WE. When we live in the culture of me, it is extremely difficult to surrender to a culture of we. Thomas Merton said, “People spend their whole lives climbing the ladder of success, only to find when they reach the top, the ladder is against the wrong wall.”

How can we release ourselves from the attachment to material gain, self-aggrandizement, and the need to control and dominate others? It begins by surrendering ourselves to the constant presence of God through the practice of daily centered prayer. Centered or contemplative prayer teaches us compassion and patience to open ourselves by entering into a deeper relationship with God. To become one with God. It opens us to the presence of the Holy Spirit where we can receive Christ's peace and connect with all of creation. Again, quoting Ram Dass, "The quieter you become, the more you can hear." Setting aside twenty minutes a day to quiet ourselves to hear, hear God's will for us individually. There are several techniques to practice centered prayer: Finding a quiet place to quiet our mind, by either focusing on an object such as a lit candle or repeating a sacred word as one focuses on inhaling and exhaling. If you are like me, sitting still is difficult. Using the App Walking Meditation on my phone, I practice a walking meditation in nature. There are many others. If you would like to learn more, there are pamphlets on Centered Prayer available in the narthex. Centering prayer empowers us to love beyond the needs of our ego or, the need for self-gratification. At the end of the trailer for the movie Mary Magdalene, Mary says, "The world will only change when we change." How true. I encourage you to set twenty minutes a day aside to surrender, you might be surprised at the true self you find there. I know I was.

A client of mine recently asked, do you believe in dinosaurs. I replied, yes, why do you ask? (C) They are not mentioned in the bible. (K) Oh, well, even though we have not seen them, there is tangible evidence at the Natural History Museum at the Carnegie that dinosaurs existed. (C) But there is no mention of them in the bible. (K) Well, the last time I checked; dinosaurs were extinct 65 million years before man appeared. If I am not mistaken, there were no Paleontologists in biblical times. Don't you remember there were two Tyrannosaurus Rexes on the Ark?

The Disciples are our witness to the physical Risen Christ. Christ said, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who believe without seeing me." How can we have the experience of the Risen Christ, without our own tangible evidence, and receive the peace and grace as the Disciples had? We are a congregation which practices the Gospel of love and

inclusion, I would not be standing before you today if that were not true. Our congregation expresses the values of love and inclusion through their missions and social justice advocacies. Through the continued practice of centering prayer, re-establishing your oneness, your personal connection with God, gradually you allow the image of god you receive, to reflect out through you in works of service.

This congregation supports many missions serving the poor and there are many area's we have opportunities to serve others. It is through our service to the underprivileged of our society and world, we can touch Christ wounds by helping to heal the woundedness of those are often forgotten in society. Like the Disciples locked in the Upper Room, service allows our eyes to be opened and thus surrender to the love of Christ who offers us peace and grace. As the Disciples, we are transformed to love unconditionally.

May Christ's peace be with you. Amen