

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Fifth Sunday of Easter/May 3, 2015

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Given the disruptions of the past weeks, I am interested in how we free ourselves from being controlled by our emotions and painful circumstance, to how we can use our emotions and even tragedy for creative and loving purpose. First, where is it that we find assurance when things are out of control? Teenagers haven't learned this yet. Part of adolescence is to take risks. And we saw some parents pulling their teens away from the violence in Baltimore. They want their children to take risks that open doors, not close them. We want to risk rescuing our neighbor rather than burning down our neighbor's store. Poverty and desperation can trigger violence. Anger is our natural response to hurt. So how do we bring the temperature down and learn to use anger as a creative energy? In addition to Baltimore, last Saturday a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck Nepal where many Tibetans have settled including friends and relations of our sexton and custodian Sonam and Dolma Dhawo. The Dalai Lama recalls a Tibetan proverb that goes: "Tragedy should be utilized as a source of strength. No matter what sort of difficulties, how painful the experience, if we lose our hope, that's our real disaster."

We need to regulate ourselves so that we become less reactive to external events and able to respond more intentionally though not less passionately. The body has a process called homeostasis. This assures that our body temperature does not get too high or too low. The hypothalamus in the brain coordinates this balancing act. Put very simply, when the body gets cold we shiver to generate more heat, and when it gets too hot we sweat which increases evaporation and cooling. Now I am interested in what creates a spiritual homeostasis so that we can keep balanced and centered. This I believe is what enables us to respond creatively and passionately.

An Ethiopian Eunuch who was the Secretary of the Treasury for the Queen of Ethiopia was traveling a wilderness road. We are meant to think of the Israelites in the wilderness. There were times when they hungered and times when they were rescued. The Eunuch is reading a passage from Second Isaiah. Philip as do other Christians take this passage as speaking of Jesus. In his Letter to the Philippians Paul says, "I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (4:12-13). Paul is not controlled by emotions and painful circumstance but is able to utilize them in order to be creative and passionate. When we get down and feel low, we need to bring the temperature up so that we may become more spirited. When we are feverish and hot-headed we need to bring the temperature down so that as the Dalai Lama notes we can use whatever tragedy that has beset us as a source of strength.

No matter whether it is the man-made poverty and desperation of a major city, or the natural catastrophe of a major earthquake, we are called to respond in ways that are hopeful, that risk helping others, and produce creative energy. We cannot do this when we are unbalanced, or unstable. I believe what keeps us balanced, what allows for a spiritual homeostasis, are three things: the gift, the fact, and the action of love.

The gift. The gift is our union with God. The Ethiopian asks, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Baptism is called the sacrament of constant union. And the answer is nothing. Race, deformity, nothing could separate him from the love of God in Jesus Christ. That is the gift. The possibility that Isaiah saw and the Ethiopian read about is now a reality. God is with us. When the branch abides in the vine, Jesus said, it is fruitful. When we are joined to Christ we have life. When we find union with Jesus we establish a spiritual balance in life that enables us to modulate our emotions and use them creatively. Every time we come up for communion we are reminded of our union with Jesus by the branches remaining in the vine heavy with grapes that are carved into our altar rail. At communion we are joined with and remain in Jesus. This is the gift.

The fact. I have never seen the Napa Valley, I have not been to wine country but I am told it is beautiful. I picture Jesus walking past the vineyards, the pruned branches now growing, the sun ripening the grapes. There is beauty in life that testifies to a loving Creator. Jesus saw this and taught it. That's the fact. We know of Jesus' life because those who walked with him talked about him. We know his teaching. First John is full of sentences like, "we have seen and do testify," and "we have known and believe." Jesus' suffering, we *know* it – as it says in the Isaiah passage that the Ethiopian was reading: "he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth..." We know his death, and we know his resurrection. People witnessed it and told of what they saw. It is not speculation. We can stay balanced because our feet are standing on solid ground. Our faith is concrete, more than abstraction. Behind the stories that we tell and have been told, there is fact.

The action. We have the gift of **union** with Jesus, the **fact** of his life, death, and resurrection that are the basis of this union, and now the **action** of love that is the outcome of this union. The early Christians didn't know what to call this love in the Greek language. It was so unusual; it did not seem to fit. Christians took a Greek word for love that is hardly found outside the Bible, *agapé*, and filled it with new meaning. They used it for Jesus' teaching to lay down one's life for another. They used it for giving of oneself in love for the life of another, for taking up one's cross. "Beloved," First John says, "since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another." Dynamic love casts out paralyzing fear. Love is an active energy. It helps to keep us balanced, focused and intentional. Martin Luther King, Jr. used this love as the fulcrum for his struggle toward human rights. He leveraged it for creative change. How different from destructive and sometimes self-destructive reactions to pain. All of the passion is there, but it is focused and creatively intentional. Action.

There are times when we feel low. We may have experienced a loss that we can't do anything about. We may feel pain and just want to get away. There are times when we turn our anger inward which is what some people call depression. More often than not, however, we just need to hang in there. We need to find our homeostasis, to bring ourselves back into balance.

Sometimes instead of falling, the emotional temperature rises. We become hot-headed. We react out of the heat of the moment. The outcome is often destructive even when we do not mean it to be. We need to regulate our emotional temperature. Spirituality helps us do this. It gives us balance. There is nothing abstract about it. It entails merely three things: the gift, the fact, and the action. God is never elsewhere than right where we are. That is the gift. Jesus reveals a loving Creator whose compassion is stronger than death. That's the fact. And because God loves us so much it energizes us to love others. That's the action. The dynamics of these three is our spiritual homeostasis. It balances us so that we keep hope. It assures us so that we keep faith. It centers us so that we love from the heart.

Amen.