

Midweek Lenten Reflection

Wednesday, March 27, 2019

In thinking about my spiritual journey, pretty much the heart of what I believe is summed up in the words of my favorite writer, Frederick Buechner:

If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

There it is. All moments. Key moments. Life itself is grace. Need I say more?

Ah, but I will.

While there are many of those key moments in life that one can point to as important and transformative in a spiritual narrative, perhaps, it is apt for me to say that I came to a fuller awareness of my spiritual life and journey in an odd and interesting way: I quit a spiritual retreat. The retreat was known as *Walk to Emmaus*, and I suspect that some of you are familiar with it. It took place during my second year at my first call in Columbus, MT. More often than not, such weekends are meant to inspire and enrich. Put simply: I couldn't stand the BS. In particular, I was deeply suspect of one of the "plants". He was a person--well-intentioned and nice--who had had a transformative experience himself in an earlier *Walk to Emmaus*, and he gave back by helping monitor one of the groups of newbies on this particular retreat. Like so many irksome experiences, this man suffered from the fatal flaw of our humanity: he couldn't shut up.

The weekend started fine. There were plenary gatherings where we heard various spiritual narratives. These were complemented by small groups, where we got to know particular retreatants at a deeper level as we shared our stories. And then the "plant" made the unfortunate move to try and explain what God was up to in the life of an old rancher who confided in the group that he had recently lost his beloved wife of 40+ years. It was the same rehashed, "God is using this for greater glory," and, "This is all a part of God's plan." My BS detector went bezerk.

While I could appreciate the man's effort to "comfort" the rancher, his theology--in my humble opinion--was of the same substance as that found in the ranchers' barn. Oddly, the blessing of the weekend was that I became good friends with an American Baptist minister from Billings who was the chaplain for that weekend. Prior to quitting the retreat, we had good conversations about the nature of God and discernment of the divine in the midst of tragic events as well as the richness of life. Leaving, however, was a step in the right direction. I walked away from a prescribed understanding of the divine and walked toward an understanding of God that was more comfortable with silence and unknowing than trying to explain away what God was up to.

Thus, this seemingly insignificant experience became a touchstone for my understanding of and engagement with faith going forward.

I was raised on a farm in a traditional religious family in northern Minnesota. My parents were wonderful in providing regular worship attendance, and I marinated in the Lutheran culture of a Lake Wobegon-like community. I learned hard work. Responsibility. Kindness. Forgiveness. Community. Yet, the unspoken practices of that particular milieu were more rooted in guilt and shame than they were in some gospel gift. God was the all-seeing, all-knowing, and all-judging. We were, as Jonathan Edwards famously penned, sinners in the hands of angry God. Or, as my brother years later, opined: Your ass was grass, and God was a lawnmower. Indeed, the harsh Minnesota winters were a fitting worldly expression of the hardness of life and the eking out of existence that was faith in such a context. There was little peace, say nothing of grace, in this scenario.

It wasn't until I entered the seminary that I appreciated the insight and wisdom of the Lutheran tradition. Particularly, I was struck by the reality and implications of *sola gratia*, or grace alone. Thus, I share with Pastor Pederson a love of the 1Peter text:

Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

This promise arose out of nothing that I did. Nothing that I said. Nothing that I conjured up. Nothing that was particularly special or noticeable about me. Nothing. That's what grace is all about. Furthermore, Nothing distinguishes me from others. We are all recipients of unmerited and unconditional acceptance and love. Sheer grace. As one of my favorite professors often quipped, "What are you going to do now that you don't have to do anything?" Indeed, what do you do?! And such a perspective radically reorients the world. There is no trick. No elixir that transforms you. No incantation or 7 habits of highly effective people that brings you closer to God. The declaration of grace is that you are already *in* God. What some refer to as realized

eschatology. Because of God's love, because of Christ's action, because of grace, we are already participating in the divine. So, now what do you do?

Which makes grace a rather tricky and subversive thing. You can't control it. That fellow on the *Walk to Emmaus* certainly wanted to control it. He wanted to dictate what God was up to and why. And I know that such a desire is so seductive, particularly in a world that continues to seemingly careen off the rails. It is no wonder that religion means "to bind". And, in many ways, religion in our culture and world has become a way to control the chaos. Bring order to the entropy. Bind up the fraying and loose ends of our psyche, our self, our family, our community, our country, and our world. Yet, religion in this context, seems woefully off the mark that grace imprints.

Indeed, I think that grace invites us away from the desire and efforts to control. Grace grabs us by the arm or leg and pulls us kicking and screaming away from this very illusion that we are in control. Indeed, I would say that grace, ultimately, breaks us open. Breaks us open and shatters the deceit of our self. Mind you, this is not a return to the guilt and shame of my northern Minnesota roots, where self-denial meant self-debasement. Rather, in the mystery and paradox of God the very loss of the self is the finding of the same. In God in Christ the problem set out is not that we aren't good enough, it's that we don't trust enough that we are loved. Loved fully. Completely. Without any strings attached. Clinging to my ego. Holding fast to my concept of self. Believing that God will reward me for being good or, at least not being bad, keeps me locked into that childhood understanding of a judgmental and harsh deity.

The reality of the divine shatters the idea that I have created for me, which, in all honesty, is not really me. It's part of the deception. Or, to borrow from the tradition, original sin. I, like Adam and Eve, keep reaching and striving for more, to be more, or to not be who I am. When, in fact, letting go of all that desire to attain and create what I think is me may be the beginning of entering into the life that God intends and Jesus has created. Indeed, Jesus models kenosis, or self-emptying, to the degree that we are forced to contend with the construct that we have created for ourselves. Jesus, in this light, ironically, is the most human human. He does not seek equality with God that to be desired. He empties himself. If we follow in this vein, we, as the writer of Colossians notes, have died and are hid with Christ in God. Pretty wild stuff.

Ultimately, this understanding became the launching pad for a recognition of faith that no longer believes that Christianity is the way, the truth, and the life. Indeed, I believe that one of the most problematic moments of Christian history is when, in the 4th century, the emperor Constantine converted. For better and certainly for worse, Christianity was never the same. The problematic elements of this marriage of religion and political power was the taking on of worldly attributes--force, might, control--as the harbingers of God. Thus, it is no surprise that grace gets

short shrift and the litany of all we must do to attain God abides. It permeates our culture. Striving. Achieving. Winning. And even speaking for God.

However, into this morass grace continues to claim us. Losing the self to find the self. And grace is the reality that opens up such an awareness. You may wonder how a Christian pastor/priest keeps his day job given this perspective. I know some of my colleagues wonder about this as well. Let me be clear: I deeply value and believe that the Jesus story and his expression of being Christ are the pathway through which I enter more fully into the mystery of God.

However, in the same way that leaving that *Walk to Emmaus* weekend allowed me to distinguish small ‘t’ truth in this journey, so also travelling to the East coast deepened my understanding of and appreciation for the deep faith, compassion, and integrity of my Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, Baha’i, and Hindu friends. Furthermore, such an awareness expanded the respect and humility that I have for the mystery that is God. The moment you allow that a Jewish friend or a Muslim imam’s practice is valid in and of itself, you must wrestle with the absoluteness of Jesus as the Christ. The second naivete that you come to is that the mystery of the divine transcends all of our traditions. Thus, we are invited to mine our tradition, while also recognizing its limits. Furthermore, jettisoning the proselytizing nature of Christianity can be liberating. On the one hand, you don’t have to do mental gymnastics to try and justify relationships with others. Again, once you accept Judaism or Islam or Buddhism as viable for others, you have relinquished the need to be right. You give up on control. On the other hand, when you recognize the validity of other paths, you are freed up to wade more fully into the ocean that is the mystery of God.

Ultimately, grace allows for all of this. For while some may want to claim grace as gift, but then quickly begin to articulate all the rules that must be followed for it to be “real” or “true” or “valid”. You find at a critical level that grace doesn’t give a damn. What grace wants is for you to live into the wonder and love and beauty that is God’s love for you always already. It isn’t a great way to organize people, to grow institutions, and to control the world around you. But, then, that’s missing the whole point. Right? Thus, I end where I began. Buechner says it well:

Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.