

“What’s at the Center?”

January 21, 2007

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Luke 4:14-21

Several people have recently reminded me about the answer I gave to a particular question in my formal interview with the search committee a year and a couple of months ago. The question was a simple one: what would be my focus in my first year as a church’s minister. My answer, not surprisingly, was correspondingly simple: I’d concentrate on getting to know the congregation – its people, its personality, and its history.

Like most simple answers, this one contained a good deal of truth, but it was also a wee bit incomplete. My simple answer left out things like trying to find a place to live, adjusting to a radically different climate and culture, developing a work routine that protected at least one day off a week, and, most important of all, trying to cope with leaving a town with at least *six* sushi restaurants to come to a town that has only one (or two, if you define “sushi” very liberally). This has been a difficult challenge!

But even with all these other things going on since my arrival here, my focus really has been on getting to know you. I’ve been doing that through pastoral visits, casual conversations, committee meetings, and choir practices and also through praying together, eating together, laughing together ... and crying together.

I think I’ve made pretty decent progress getting to know you, although I still have a long way to go. To borrow a line from Alcoholics Anonymous, I claim *progress*, not *perfection* in this process. (And, just for the record, I don’t claim “perfection” in anything!)

In my visits, conversations, and experiences with you, I’ve had a two-part agenda, and I still have it. The first part is all about taking you in, just as you are. It’s about discovering, greeting, and celebrating the unique beauty of God that you and you alone bring into this world. This first part of what I’ve been up to, what I’ve been given the priceless gift of being *able* to do, is to see that breathtaking beauty, to ask if you see it, too, and to stand in utter wonder before the Spirit’s holy presence in you and in this congregation. So that’s my answer to this sermon’s question, what’s at the center ... what’s at *your* center? What’s at the center is the loving, healing beauty of God.

But as clear as that beauty is, I’m old enough and I’ve gotten to know enough of you and I’ve struggled enough with it in my own life, to know how *impossible* it can seem to believe that it really resides within us. I know *difficult* it is to believe, accept, and embrace that such beauty is, in fact, the central reality of our being.

Doctor and healer Rachel Naomi Remen tells a story of this difficulty, a story of disconnection and, ultimately, *discovery* of what’s at the center. It’s the story of a highly successful, elegant business woman who began to meet with Dr. Remen after being diagnosed with cancer. During their first meeting, this woman told the doctor how bad she was, how selfish, hard, uncaring, and unloving, and she said that she could not get well because she had “earned” the cancer.

Hearing repeatedly how “bad” this woman was, Dr. Remen urged her to start at the beginning, and so, over eight months, she told her the story of her life. This woman

had born in Vietnam during the war, and one morning, when she was four years old, she hid in the kitchen as soldiers killed her parents. She became a very young orphan, at a time and in a world without mercy. She had starved; she had been brutalized. She became one of a pack of homeless children who had stolen, betrayed, hated, and even killed to survive.

As she told the stories of her life, over and over this woman continued to tell Rachel Remen, “I am a bad person; I’m filled with such darkness.” Dr. Remen would listen and urge her not to stop, to tell her all that she had done. At the end of one of her stories, Dr. Remen writes, “I was overwhelmed by the fact that she had actually managed to live with such memories”

Finally, after telling the more recent stories of her ruthless business practices, her anger, her distrust, and her unkindness, this woman came in to Dr. Remen’s office and said, “I have no more stories to tell.” When Dr. Remen asked if it was a relief to be at the end of her stories, she said, “No, it feels empty.” Having experienced the ugliness of violence and betrayal, having done whatever she needed to do, no matter how ugly, to survive, she had come to believe that was all there was to her. And having sought to remove that ugliness from her center by telling the truth of her life, she thought there was nothing left within her, nothing but emptiness at her center.

A few weeks later, she had a dream, one of the first she’d ever been able to remember. In the dream, she had been looking in a mirror. She could see through her clothes, through her skin, into the depths of her being, into her very center. She saw that she was filled with darkness and felt the shame she had carried for so many years. But then she herself started to move, moving into and through the mirror, deeper and deeper into her own darkness. She went forward, unable to see anything; she was certain that the darkness had no end, no limit. But then she saw a tiny spot, far ahead. She moved closer and closer and realized what it was. It was a rose, a single rose.

As she described this dream, she began to cry in Dr. Remen’s office for the first time. “It’s very beautiful,” she said. “I can see it clearly, the stem with its leaves and thorns. It’s just beginning to open. And its color is indescribable: the softest, most tender, most exquisite shade of pink.” When Dr. Remen asked what the dream meant to her, the woman began to sob. “It’s mine. It’s still there. All this time [and] it is still there. It has waited for me to come back for it.”

Long convinced that the brutality and cruelty of her life had destroyed the soft, tender beauty at her center, this woman discovered that it had been buried, not destroyed, and she discovered that it was ready to guide her back into life instead of ruthless survival.

Few of us may have stories as dramatic and painful as this woman, but we all carry wounds that others have inflicted on us, and we all carry wounds we’ve inflicted on ourselves. There are any number of mistakes or regrets or fears that can cover that beauty and convince us that it has disappeared altogether. But it hasn’t disappeared. It’s still there, waiting to be rediscovered.

So that’s the first part of what I’m doing as I get to know you. I’m seeking, discovering, and celebrating the beauty of God at your center, and I’m urging you to see it and celebrate it, too. The second part of what I’m doing is trying to see what’s obscuring that beauty, to see what’s distorting it and preventing it from radiating in you and in this church as fully as it can. I’m trying to discover and nurture the beauty of God

that is at the center of all of us *as a congregation*, and to do that, I and we need to see what keeps that center hidden and confined. These tasks lie at the heart of Christian ministry, both lay and ordained ministry.

As Luke describes it in this morning's second reading, Jesus' ministry was one of freeing the beauty and power of God within all of humanity. As Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah, the people of Nazareth hear that he has come to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and freedom and release to the captive and the oppressed. I have no doubt that Jesus' ministry was and is focused on *physical, material* poverty, oppression, and captivity, and all of us in this land of material wealth and privilege need to hear Jesus' challenge to our wealth and privilege. But I also have no doubt that his ministry was and is focused on *spiritual* poverty, oppression, and captivity. I have no doubt that in Jesus of Nazareth and in the living Christ of faith, God is calling us out of our own poverty of vision and is longing to free the beauty of the spirit that lies hidden and covered within us.

I think the Gospel of Luke is asking me and asking all of us to discern what *blinds* us as individuals and as a community, so that we can't see the beauty of God at our center and at the center of creation? What *oppresses* us, so that we're not free to live from that center of beauty and blessedness? What holds us *captive*, so that we haven't been released from our fear, our anger, or our despair. And the Gospel is inviting us to trust that, in Jesus, God is at work, teaching us to see clearly and freeing the sacred beauty within us, so that it can guide us in all that we do.

And strangely enough, I hear something similar in this morning's reading from the Book of Nehemiah. In Nehemiah, the people of ancient Israel have been freed from exile and have returned home. Having settled in, they gather to hear the book of the law of Moses, the Torah. After Ezra the priest reads the Torah to the people, Nehemiah the governor blesses them on their way, to return to their towns. He tells them not to weep, but to trust the joy of God as their strength and then to go, eat, drink and share what they have with those who have nothing.

For those of us in the 21st century, this whole scene may seem bizarre, even laughable. But I invite you to look more deeply, to trust, even if for a few minutes, that the beauty of God is within this story and within the people of ancient Israel. The people have gathered, and they have heard all of the Torah, from early morning until midday. And some of what they've heard are the details of cultic practices that were widespread in their world, cultic practices of sacrifice and purity that no longer speak the truth to many people.

But if we look beyond those specific ancient cultural practices, we can see the beauty of the Spirit in the Torah and the beauty of the people who hold it dear. In the Torah, the people hear that God seeks them out and claims them as God's very own. They hear God's call to love God with all their heart, all their mind, and all their strength ... and to love their neighbors as themselves. They hear the sacred call to welcome the stranger and the alien, to care for the poorest and least powerful among them, to release their debtors. They hear the call to remember that the land belongs to God and is not theirs to exploit and the call to ensure that *everyone*, even the land, is allowed to rest on the Sabbath day or in the Sabbath year. What *I* hear in the Torah is God's call to see and honor and care for the beauty of God in everything. My hope is that you can hear that call, too.

It's a call that can guide all of us in our relationships with one another, with family and friends, and with those people we may consider to be our enemies. There is within each of you the beauty of God's spirit, indescribable and indestructible. Look for it in yourself. Look for it in one another. When you find that you can't see it, when you discover something that's blocking your ability to behold it – and to be held by it – be willing to let go of the fear, the doubt, the pain, the intolerance, or the arrogance that's blocking you. Be willing to let go of anything that stands in the way of your embrace of that beauty within you, within everyone, and within everything. That beauty is there; God is ready to help you see it and free it.

Amen.

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