
Standing in the Glow of Ripeness

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins
Proper 4 – Year C

In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all...Amen. Good morning and welcome to the Cathedral on this second Sunday after Pentecost, and as we begin our journey into the long green season of ordinary time and a weekend during which we give thanks to those who gave, as Abraham Lincoln put it, the last full measure of devotion. I've just returned from serving as psychological health faculty for CREDO, an Episcopal program for clergy. CREDO provides an opportunity for the participants to get away for discernment, care, rest, renewal, and discernment. It helps both active and retired clergy participants by presenting a holistic approach to wellness for mind, body, spirit, and heart. Participants examine and evaluate their health and wellness from four specific areas of their lives: spiritual; vocational; physical and emotional health; and financial. The participants are asked to create a Rule of Life, and to cultivate disciplines and practices that can sustain them in the ministries to which they return. I have been serving on this faculty for several years now, and inevitably this work gives me hope for the church, and deep appreciation for those who serve. The word CREDO means, in this case, that to which "I give my heart." And, in some ways, the texts from Galatians and from Luke precisely address the questions: to what do we give our hearts, and why?

Since that first and familiar sermon in Nazareth, Jesus has been teaching and healing around the countryside, and in chapter 6 he delivers Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount—that is, the Sermon on the Plain, in which he teaches us, among other lessons, the importance of loving our enemies and of "hearing/doing," of action that responds to, and expresses, the good news. From there, Jesus heads to this border town, Capernaum, the "village of compassion" that might also be called "the village of compassion but with a strong military presence." Soldiers were there to keep the peace so taxes and tolls could be collected, and although they were not Roman troops their commander was clearly a Gentile, an outsider, an "other" to the Jews gathered around Jesus. The centurion, so called because he commands one hundred men, was also a man of enough means to be a generous benefactor to the Jewish people, for he made "fifty to one hundred times the pay of an ordinary soldier." It's here then, in the village of compassion that Jesus follows up his words with action on behalf of the very enemies he teaches us to love.

The centurion works through intermediaries, emissaries who provide good references to vouch for him. As is true with CREDO, and in the Koinonia we seek to embody here, I see community at work in this passage, not just in those who are interceding for the centurion and his servant, but in the relationships the centurion has built with those he chooses to "love" rather than intimidate. The servant himself is a character in this story, unheard and unseen but greatly blessed by Jesus, and perhaps greatly loved by the centurion. After all, the military man is humbling himself in order to gain healing for one who can't ask for it himself. That says something about the quality of their bond. The more I work in mental health, and in ministry, the more I find a deep spiritual reality in the "web of human connectedness" that impels us to speak on behalf of those who often cannot speak for themselves.

This communal spirit or web of compassion can contest the current cultural zeitgeist of self-sufficiency and privacy that has eroded our public life. This is not a wholly accurate picture of many people and communities of faith, of course, and we've seen tremendous expressions of compassion and generosity when there is a tragedy in our midst. I experience this here, so often, and at CREDO I am inspired by the compassion of the sometimes wounded healers who come to us for care, and nurture and solace, and sometimes to be healed themselves. And I am borne along by my fellow faculty colleagues.

People *want to do something* in the face of suffering. However, sometimes we may be more willing to give than to receive, because—in this culture of self-sufficiency—we don't like feeling vulnerable or in anyone's debt. I wonder, what do you think are impediments to a sense of community in our own time? The world sometimes seems connected only by trade agreements, electronic banking, computer networks, shipping lanes, the internet, and the seeking of profit—nothing else. But Creation is a holy web of relationships, a gift meant for all; it vibrates with the pain of all its parts; its destiny is joy. Today, we think we are connected because of technology, and perhaps we are, but *connections* are not necessarily *relationships*. The church can often provide that larger community in which we can explore our faith, test our beliefs, find support and challenge, and be inspired to act together on behalf of others. What can the church learn from this story in Luke's Gospel, about reaching out in compassion in the face of suffering and need? In a recent essay the author Parker Palmer is musing on what really gives our lives meaning. In so doing he quotes a lovely poem by Czeslaw Milosz:

Love means to learn to look at yourself
The way one looks at distant things
For you are only one thing among many.
And whoever sees that way heals his heart,
Without knowing it, from various ills.
A bird and a tree say to him: Friend.

Then he wants to use himself and things
So that they stand in the glow of ripeness.
It doesn't matter whether he knows what he serves:
Who serves best doesn't always understand.

I believe the Centurion understood this. He was able to see that peace comes when I understand that I am “only one thing among many,” no more and no less important than the bird and the tree Milosz writes about. “There’s much I don’t know about birds and trees,” Parker Palmer writes, “but this I know for sure: they don’t wonder or worry about whether their lives have meaning. They simply be what they be and, in the process, serve people like me who are elevated by their presence.” I agree. Being with my fellow clergy amidst the beauty of Trinity Conference Center on the Outer Banks, we were immersed in the gift of creation at its best, between sea and sound, as the Trinity Conference Center sign says. Early morning runs found me traversing the island among pelicans, and lovely herons, dolphins, raccoons, and a host of birds unfamiliar to me and such a gift to us all. I felt myself to be a small part of a very big narrative. Milosz says, “whoever sees that way heals his heart, / Without knowing it, from various ills.” As Palmer says, “Time and again, that’s been my experience. There’s nothing like a walk in the woods, alongside the ocean, into the mountains or across the desert to put my life in perspective and help me take heart again. In places such as those, the things of nature befriend me —just as Milosz says they will— as I settle into the comforting knowledge that I am “only one thing among many.” Then there are Milosz’s beautiful words about allowing one’s self and the world of things to “stand in the glow of ripeness.” I don’t know exactly what this means, but as Palmer writes: “once I understand that I’m not the sun at the center of anyone’s solar system, I can step aside, stop casting a shadow everywhere I go, and allow the true sun to shine on everyone and everything, making all things ripe with the glow of new life. This, it would seem, is Milosz’s ultimate definition of love, and it works for me.” This, it seems to me, is seeding not human approval, but God’s approval, as Paul suggests.

So, for the moment, we can rest easy with the notion that I don’t need to ask or answer the question, “Does my life have meaning?” All we need do is to keep living as one among many as well as I can, hoping to help myself and others “stand in the glow of ripeness.” I think my clergy colleagues return from CREDO with a deepened sense of God’s compassion and gracefulness. I know I do. God’s saving grace extends beyond the invited guests to those uninvited and on the margins. To whom do we turn, dear one’s when available resources fail us or are depleted? Often we cling to a faith that longs to call out to others for prayer at the bedside vigil or in moments of need. Sometimes it is the simple burden of the mundane and everyday life that urges us to reach out. And when we finally do reach out, too often we do so with a sense of shame or failure that our faith is not strong enough to go it alone. But CREDO, and this community here gathered, and my colleagues in pastoral counseling, and many others, are still teaching me that a lived faith must see itself as part of the world. We each need others to speak with and for us, and to help us encounter the joys, challenges, sorrows and gifts of our lives. In so doing we cultivate our ability to, as Milosz says, “Stand in the glow of ripeness,” and in so doing, embrace the gift of compassionate community that is the Body of Christ. Amen.

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