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Fifth Sunday after Epiphany B, February 4, 2018

Last week I spoke about how, in Christ Jesus, God made known to us the mystery of God's Kingdom in and around and through us - the Kingdom of God within us. And, today we get some deeper insight into the workings of that Kingdom in the story of Jesus healing and Jesus praying and then going out and proclaiming and healing again. What's revealed to us in this story is the Kingdom's inner workings - the inner-workings of God's Grand Plan, an out-pouring of God's creative force of love, and taking in again of that same force. It is a continual flow of pouring out, taking in, and pouring out again.

In the Gospel Jesus pours out God's love by healing Peter's mother-in-law and then heals the many curious who come to see. Then, Jesus goes off to a deserted place, and receives back God's creative force in prayer, only to go out and pour it out again. This is the dynamic we see throughout the Gospel, pouring out and taking in, pouring out and taking in. And, this is precisely our call to participate in the Kingdom. We also are called to pour out God's healing love into the world, and to receive it back again. To participate in God's Divine Dance of transformative love.

And, this great cycle of pouring out and taking in and pouring out again, can only be experienced when we are fully present. Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law, healed the curious onlookers, went out and prayed, and then got up and went out to do it all again, precisely because he was able to be present to what James Finley calls ***“the concrete immediacy of life in which the infinite love of God is manifesting itself in the moment...the concrete immediacy of life in which the infinite love of God is manifesting itself in the moment.”*** This full presence to the inner workings of the Kingdom is what Jesus exemplified, and it is what he called us to do as well. We all have within us the power to heal, to restore, to cast, out, and to transform...but, only to the extent that we are able to be fully present to the concrete immediacy of God's love being poured out in love to us in the present moment.

Jesus showed us what being fully present looked like - he met people exactly where they were and not where he thought they should be - whether sick or healthy, oppressed or oppressors, poor or rich, sinner or righteous. Jesus was fully present to longing, present to woundedness, present to joy, present to suffering - that of others and his own - present to people's disconnection from each other and from God. In teaching his disciples, again and again he called them out of their expectations of how things should be and back into the reality of God's presence among them. His commands to us were all about embracing the present - especially the present we would just as soon pass us by, those painful moments we'd like to ignore. Because, he knew the greatest opportunities for healing and transformation came when we embrace the things in life most difficult to accept - love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do not worry about what you will eat or drink, or what you will wear.

Being present is so difficult, though. We want so much to be anywhere but here and now - obsessing about the past, worrying about future, planning, judging, counting, coveting, escaping.

But, there are those moments aren't there, when all there is...is you and the moment...and God. It could be you and the moment with your newborn grandson...nothing else exists, but the fragile intimacy of that infinite moment. And, there is God. It could be that moment looking out into the horizon, when you spot a hawk floating effortlessly in the air...just you and that hawk...and God. It could be that moment of grace when you are truly present for the suffering of another...just you and their pain...and God. No need to fix, no need to change anything, no need for that moment to be anything other than what it is. It is in that space of infinite fragility...the concrete immediacy of life in that moment...that healing is happening, that God is at work in the world. It is in those moments that the fullness of God's love is made manifest to us. They are exhilarating, they are awe-inspiring. And, those moments are renewing only to the extent that we can be fully present in the concrete immediacy of that moment...and then let it go.

And, in those moments are also the occasions of sin - when we do not want to be there, when we're eager to get on to the next thing, obsess on whatever the flavor of the month is, judge, compare, dismiss... or when

we want to hold on, make it about us, dwell in our own specialness. Those are the moments of separation that take us further and further away from the concrete immediacy of God p

Prayer is the antidote to this disruption of the concrete immediacy of God manifest in the moment. Jesus went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. It's so important that we see where and when Jesus prayed in the Gospels, and it was before a significant teaching or event took place and after a significant teaching and event took place. He needed to renew and he needed to let go, so he might be filled again to continue God's work. In today's reading he cures Peter's sick mother-in-law, then heals the many who were gathered. Then he goes out to a deserted place and prays. After Peter and the gang find him (or he allows himself to be found), he says to them, "Come on, friends lets go out and proclaim the Good News." He didn't say, "Did you see that, guys? Did you see what I just did? Who's buying the first round?" Because, Jesus was steeped in a spiritual practice that kept him absolutely grounded in the concrete immediacy of life itself, which is the concrete immediacy of God, he was able to let of the past, regardless of wonderful it was, and move forward into the future. This is the great lesson for us. Anything we do that helps us assume the stance that offers the least resistance to being pulled into the concrete immediacy of life, **that** is spiritual practice, and it is what we should be devoting our lives to with all our hearts. Those spiritual practices - contemplative prayer, meditation, repentance and reconciliation, transform us because it is in those practices that we must continually let go, release all that keeps us from being present - our worries, our sins, our obsessions, our questions, our guilt, our shame, our blaming, our pride, our wants, our expectations. In allowing ourselves to be stripped layer by layer, of everything that keeps us out of the present moment, we are made more effective instruments of God's work in the world.

My dear sisters and brothers. Jesus Christ revealed to us the inner workings of the Kingdom, in which we participate in a continual outpouring of love in and around and through us. God, sustains the cosmos, strengthens the weak, and restores those who have fallen, through those of us present enough, open enough, willing enough, to be the conduit of God's restorative work. As we participate in this Divine

Dance, pouring out and taking in, pouring out and taking in, we ourselves are renewed and transformed, as Isaiah says in today's Hebrew Scripture,

“those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.”

Let us pray that we might be let go of all that holds us back, all that keeps us from fully participating in God's Kingdom - God, I offer myself to you, to build with me and to do with me as you will. Relieve me of the bondage of self that I may better do your will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Your Power, Your Love, and Your Way of life. May I do Your will always!"