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Proper 21A, October 1, 2017

Today, I'm going to shift from my usual practice of preaching from the Gospel reading and preach from the epistle reading. What I'd like to share with you today is based largely on teachings about centering prayer by The Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault, Episcopal priest, theologian, and mystic, and also one of my teachers from the Center for Action and Contemplation.

In Philippians we have one of the earliest hymns about Christ, which Paul uses as direction about how we should pattern our lives, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..."

"...though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped at, (exploited, used to advantage, clinged to) rather he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross."

These verses should be familiar to all of us. This passage from Philippians is read on the Feast of the Holy Name, on Palm Sunday, and on the Feast of the Holy Cross, because these words form the core of what we believe as Christians - God took human form, in the person of Jesus; accepted humiliation, suffering, and death in obedience to Divine will; and through his resurrection conquered death.

I'd like us to focus deeply on these words today, into the heart of this passage, to hear what it's teaching us spiritually, emotionally and physiologically.

First, Paul says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ." This is nothing new. Paul is reiterating what Jesus taught and demonstrated in his life. He wanted us to be imitators of Jesus, just as Jesus called us to pattern ourselves after him.

Then, Paul tells us what it means to have the mind of Christ - "Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped at." The New Revised Standard translation uses "exploited" for the Greek word *harpagmos*. Other translations use

“grasped at”, “clinged to”, or “used to advantage.” Lets use *grasp* and, I’ll show you why.

Everybody make the gesture that corresponds to **grasp**, on the count of three...

Now look around, at one another...not a very friendly gesture, is it?

So, what’s the opposite of this gesture, show it with your hands ...

Right. It’s the gesture of openness, isn’t it? And, isn’t that the gesture of

Christ? Can’t you just imagine Jesus with this gesture of open arms and hands? This is what emptying looks like. “He emptied himself and took

the form of a servant.” In Greek the word was *ekenosene*, which can

mean let go, empty, release. Whatever word we use here, it’s clear that

the same mind as Christ is **not** clinging to, or grasp at, or exploiting. It’s some form of letting go. It’s the mindset of Jesus, the Way of the Cross.

When we are confronted in life by a challenging situation - whether social, emotional, relational, spiritual - we are to have the same mindset

as Christ, which is openness, letting go. Rather than grasping, clinging,

defending - we release, let go, forgive, engage. Paul tells us only what

Jesus’ whole life told us, “Don’t cling to your certainties, your

judgments, your possessions, your preconceived ideas, your assumptions

about yourself or others. Let it go.” Over, and over again Jesus

demonstrated and taught the same thing from healing the outcasts and

sinner to the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. And, at Gethsemane

he showed us the pinnacle of release - he went from this (pleading,

clenched) to this (open palms open face). This great spiritual truth of

*kenosis* is found throughout our Judeo-Christian teaching from the

binding of Isaac to the martyrdom of Stephen. Some form of letting go is

found in all the great world religions. The gesture of *yes*, of *I’m sorry*, of

*I’m hurt*, of *talk to me*, of *take from me* - these are the gestures of

greatest spiritual connection. It is when we make these gestures both

inwardly and outwardly that we come closest to God, closest to our

Christian calling, and closest to our truest identity as beloved of God. It

is the gesture and posture of *no*, of *blame*, of *defense*, of *retaliation*, that

we move farthest from Christ and the light of God’s love.

And, while this great spiritual truth may have been with us for ages upon

ages, it is in these modern times that we are starting to understand the

science behind letting go. Neurobiology, the science of how the brain

works, is beginning to show how our responses to outside stimuli are received in the brain. When we react to challenging stimuli with defensiveness or constriction, the pathway in the brain that lights up is the *amygdala*, our lizard brain. And the physical response is fight or flight. When we go like this (clench), outwardly and inwardly, deep inside our lizard brain registers, “danger,” releases massive amounts of adrenaline, our heart races, and our body gears up for a fight. This happens whether we’re reacting to a dish being broken in the kitchen, somebody contradicting a deeply held political view, or a sudden drop in our stock portfolio.

But, when we practice letting go, our emotional responses begin to change, and rather than lighting up our amygdala, challenging situations begin to process through the more evolutionarily advanced sections of our brain - the neocortex and the prefrontal lobes. And, amazingly, the pulses of brain activity begin to synch with the heart, keeping us calm and collected while our greater brain can deal with the situation in a more reasoned, less emotionally-charged manner.

Practicing letting go isn’t just something we do when responding to outside stimuli, it can also be practiced in prayer. When we engage in contemplative prayer - letting go of thoughts, worries, sensations, as they arise and making room for God - each one of those acts of release in prayer strengthens the “letting go muscle,” and we begin to see corresponding results in how we react to life’s challenges. Even if we spend ten minutes in silent meditation releasing thoughts a hundred different times, those are one hundred opportunities of “letting go.”

Now, I know this all sounds like very lofty, unattainable teaching.

Believe me, I know just how clenched my own hands and heart can get in the midst of troubles. Sometimes it seems darn near impossible to go from this (fists clenched) to this (arms open). The idea of responding to insults, injuries, disasters, tragedies with openness rather than trepidation seems pretty close to ridiculous. But, I’d like us to keep two important things in mind when considering any teachings of our faith that seem impossible,

First, it’s only practice. We aren’t expected to be perfect at it. God only expects us to keep trying. And, as with any difficult skill, we don’t start with the hard stuff. We start with what’s doable, and with practice move

to the slightly more challenging. With each small act of letting go, we are strengthened for the next act of letting go. And, when we catch ourselves clenching up, reacting like this...to a situation, we just take a breath and respond to our own mistakes with gentleness and openness. The very responding to our own missteps with forgiveness rather than judgment is itself an act of kenosis.

And, the second thing we should remember, as we try to be of the same mind as Christ, is we do not do this work alone. As with all the holy work we do, we are helped in our practice by the very one who “split the sea” and let the people pass through. It is the Almighty who made water come from a rock in the wilderness, who will help coax open our clenched hands and heart, to let blessing and love flow like a river, “for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Amen.