

Being seeds of New Creation:

Sermon given on May 25th, 2008 by The Rev. Joe Summers

(Readings: Isaiah 49:8-16a, I Cor. 4:1-5, Matt 6:24-34)

Kirby is our dog, and he's become one of my spiritual guides. Today I want to begin by talking about what Kirby's been teaching me about trust and submission.

That word submission rightfully scares many of us. Our whole vision of it is rooted in the vision of domination where one person imposes their will on another, or we cooperate with the denial of one's own humanity. This is happened in the religious community I was in where you were supposed to have a "head" who made all your major decisions for you, so it's taken me a long time to be open to seeing anything good in submission, but my dog Kirby's been teaching me a different vision of submission.

Kirby is at the bottom of the food chain, and he knows it. I remember the cartoon "Peanuts" where, at one point, Charlie Brown goes to talk with Lucy about his problems, and Lucy suggests that perhaps he suffers from "Pantophobia"--the fear of everything. And Charlie gleefully shouts out --"that's it!"

Kirby's so scared of everything, he will only bark when he's certain you are playing with him and won't confuse his bark with a real bark, or when something is very clearly beneath him on the food chain, such as a squirrel, and even then only so long as the squirrel is running away from him.

You might think that, being afraid of everything, Kirby might have an awful life, but he doesn't. I think he actually has a pretty great life. Why? Because Kirby's able to put his trust in those who care for him. If he's on his own, he's basically afraid to go anywhere, but with us he wants to explore everywhere. On his own, he's pretty terrified of most dogs. With us, he will go right up to a big dog that's barking ferociously behind a fence and stamp his feet as if he were a bull, and then mark the territory within inches of the fence. Submitting to trusting us allows Kirby to enter a space where he can play and enjoy himself. Every day Kirby teaches me that you can be terribly fearful, and still totally enjoy yourself, as he goes through his day, throwing himself on his back, a terribly vulnerable position, to let others love him by rubbing his stomach. The result is that he gets a lot of love.

This reminds me of my dad who was a terribly anxious person. He would worry about anything and everything. His fears could make something seem like a catastrophe in a moments notice. That's part of why he loved bus tours for vacations in foreign countries. On such tours he could simply enjoy himself because someone else was responsible for seeing that we all had a place to sleep and food to eat. Someone else was responsible for seeing that the bus didn't break down and that we got to where we were going. When my dad could entrust himself to others, he was a completely different person.

I think too of geese who, when they are flying long distances, practice a kind of rotating leadership. Apparently the V formation cuts down the wind resistance on all but the lead bird, so they rotate whose out in front so that they each have a chance to rest. I also learned last week that scientists are studying sled dogs because, when they are running really long distances together, they apparently enter a state of relaxation. This means that their bodies don't try to consume fat, which is apparently what causes fatigue, so they are able to run hundreds of miles in a relaxed state and not exhaust themselves.

All of these images challenge us to think about how we can be about the work of Jubilee (the work of justice, liberation, compassion) from a place of rest, renewal, and recreation. We need to learn how to do the work of Jubilee from such a place if we want to have others join us in this work, if we want to have the energy to keep on keeping on, if we don't want to lose our own humanity in the course of doing this kind of difficult work which brings us into contact with so much injustice and so much suffering.

We hear the prophet Isaiah today, speaking in the Name of God say:

I have given you as a covenant to the people to apportion the desolate heritage,
to say to the prisoners--"Come out!"
to say to those who are in the darkness of shame "Show yourselves"

We, you and I, are meant to be God's covenant to the peoples of the earth: to re-waken people to the divine life within them, to be seeds of fire that help to re-animate all.

I was struck by Karl Pohrt's statement from two weeks ago about what he sees as the root of what's wrong in our world today. As I heard it, it's basically about people being stuck. People being stuck in a wide variety of things that keep us from being who we need to be and doing what needs to be done. Being stuck in such a way that we're closed off to the healing/wholeness creating power that is within us--the power that is every bit as powerful as those forces that lead us to harm ourselves and one another.

How do we become seeds of fire so that we can help reawaken people to the divine power that is within them? We start by getting ourselves unstuck. How do we get unstuck? That's part of what today's gospel is about.

In today's gospel Jesus says to those of us who are slaves of fear that you cannot serve two masters. We cannot have both fear and God be our master. Jesus says that we cannot be about making our fears for our well being be the center of our lives, and be about helping to bring about the reign of God on earth.

Then he offers up this incredible image: "Consider the lilies of the field.. they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory, was not clothed like one of these."

Besides being true--what does that mean? I think it means we are being called to live from a

place of trust and beauty and hope and to make trust and beauty and hope our daily bread, rather than the bread of fear, anxiety, and doom.

But aren't there all sorts of good reasons to feel anxious, fearful, and full of dread? Absolutely!!!

And here I want to step back a moment and talk about the war between good and evil. I'm not sure that's a phrase I ever used before, but I heard it this week in a Bob Marley song, and it struck me. Memorial day reminds me of the terrible price paid by our country's sons and daughters for our country's promoting the idea that the war between good and evil is a war between good people and evil people. I'm not a pacifist, so I don't believe war is always wrong, but the idea that war is ever about good people versus evil people is a lie. It's a lie that's gotten our people to fight one wrong war after another over the last 100 years. It's a lie that keeps us from focusing on the real battle between good and evil:

- the war between whether all have enough to eat, or some have too much, and others starve.
- the war between whether people's bodies are honored and cared for and respected, or whether they are used, abused and mutilated.
- the war between whether people live the incredibly vibrant life of being free human beings, or they live as ghosts, controlled by powers within them or outside of them.

Jesus had no illusions about the dangers we face in life. He had no illusions about the potentially deadly consequence of engaging in this struggle between good and evil. But he said that we can only be victorious in this struggle if we learn to live from a place of trust.

The Latin American Writer Eduardo Galeano wrote about the dangers of exile and bitterness. To his fellow political refugees he wrote : "What will we build the new society out of if in the course of exile we become bricks of shit."

If we take seriously Jesus's vision of social transformation as a process of calling the living dead back to life, we can't do it from a place of living death. We can't do it from a place of terror. We can't do it from a place of hatred, bitterness, or resentment. Living in terror or bitterness simply cuts us off from our capacity to listen people back into speech, to be able to inspire others to be imaginative and creative in the ways we need to be to get out of this mess.

Another one of the quotes that has become terribly important to me is one from Thomas Merton in which he said that, when he first went into the monastery, he saw himself as something like a storm trooper for God, waging some kind of spiritual war through prayers. However, after many decades in the monastery, he said that he had come to the conclusion that, if there was any justification of being a monastic, it is that the ability to play in a world of suffering is the ultimate testament of grace.

Many of us seemed to get tricked into believing that it is somehow wrong to play in a world of suffering, but I think you will find that almost always, within the most successful struggles for

social change, there is a celebration of life that encourages people to play, and laugh, and sing and dance. Without trust we can't play. Without play we become the victims of evil.

One of our lessons from First Peter several weeks ago said: "Cast all your anxiety upon God, because, like a roaring lion, your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour." It's a line that used to frighten me years ago. Now it almost makes me laugh, because it is so true. When we stay in an anxious place, we get devoured.

Let go of the way of anxiety. Embrace the way of peace. This is one of the fundamental truths shared by so many of the world's great religions.

Shalom (Peace /wholeness) is the way people greet people in the Jewish world. Judaism is ultimately to be about a path of peace. It is a path that begins with receiving the blessing of peace, the joy of creation, a day that begins with rest, a week that ends with rest and renewal..

Salaam (Peace/wholeness) is the way people greet one another in the Muslim world. Islam is ultimately supposed to be about Salaam. Islam means to surrender or to submit to the Peace of God.

I think this is ultimately what the Navajo were talking about in their call to "walk in beauty."

The Buddha, teaching a way of compassion, called on people to let go of the path of anxious grasping and open themselves to the realm beyond creation--the realm beyond thing-ness.

I think this is also what Jesus was pointing towards, when he says the Human One is called to give up all, but yet, in that letting go, will find infinite reward, not in some after life but here and now.

We find ourselves in a dramatic conflict between good and evil. It's not some weird disembodied spiritual war, but good and evil embodied in how we are individually and collectively living our lives. Most of us come into this conflict as people who have been slaves of fear. Once you've been a slave of fear, I think you'll always carry that mark, the voice that says --it is doom alone that counts, the voice of scarcity that says, we are going to be abandoned, we are not going to get what we need to survive. It is the voice that is at the root of every obsession, every addiction, every act of violence.

Its is the voice that is the opposite of the voice that says" All will be well, and all manner of things shall be well." That's the voice of Psalm 23. That's the voice of the still waters, the voice of being able to feast, even in the presence of one's enemies, with joy overflowing. That's the voice of the lilies of the field.

Now it is important to say here that some have tried to withdraw into this spirit of peace. They have become as addicted to its peace as they were addicted to fear. It's important to recognize

that Jesus doesn't do that. For Jesus, it's all about living life fully, being in the world, going into every aspect of life and creation and on this journey through the world as it is -- letting ourselves be steadily renewed by the Spirit, by this serenity, by this beauty.

It's also important for us to consider a kind of opposite truth that, for many of us who have grown up shaped and controlled by the voice of despair, doom, terror and shame---when people threaten us with terrible things, or present us with litanies of horror, thinking that will facilitate some kind of good change, it may well do the opposite by triggering the survivor in us, the one who has learned to not care for others.

That's why we need to be so careful when we recite litanies of horror, whether they be about the destruction of our world or her peoples. Listen and watch for how others respond to such a litany. See if it is animating those hearing it or whether they seem to be withdrawing into isolation, shame, terror, and stuckness.

Yes-- we absolutely need to deal with our litanies of horror; they are real; they are part our personal and collective reality, but we need to realize that most of us can only take in those litanies in a health productive way, when we are doing it from a place where we are clearly grounded in the Spirit. Otherwise, horror tends to be the final word.

Right now in our world the dead control the living--that's part of how we are stuck. Why is it that the extreme inequality that leaves 2-3% super wealthy and the vast majority not making it, rules our world and our country? Why is it we are allowing our planet to be destroyed? Because, rather than realizing that everything is fluid and changeable, people accept terrible things because that's the way things have been, and therefore they believe that's the way they should be or always will be. But the great animating spirit, the spirit the re-creates the world, the Spirit that sets the world on fire with animating spirit so that can once again embrace this fluid and transformable reality we call ourselves and our world, seeks to work through us. May all our gatherings be times in which we are renewed in and through this spirit so that we might be seeds of the fire of new creation. For if we are willing God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us.