

“Isolation and the Web of Grace”

Sermon given on October 21, 2007 at the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation by the Rev. Joe Summers

(Proper 24(C): Jereimiah 31:27-34, 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5, Luke 18:1-8)

“How marvelous the grace that caught my falling soul”

From the hymn “He looked Beyond my Fault”

Jesus spoke of the need for people to “storm heaven” with their prayers, as if heaven were some kind of fortress that needed to be retaken barrier by barrier. We hear a similar message in today’s parable as Jesus suggests we need to approach God the way a widow would an unjust judge--continually harassing him-- until he finally relents just so he can have a little peace, or maybe the way our pet or partner force us back into relationship through getting right in our face when we’ve checked out and are no longer present.

Parables are generally trying to make a single point yet they often get turned into metaphors that are then used to make the wrong point. In this case, Jesus is not saying God will only act if he harass him enough because he is unjust. Rather, he’s saying that the God reality that needs to happen in our lives and world will only happen if we exercise a kind of passionate persistent prayer. In other words, a prayer life which consists of occasionally saying, “God--if you are out there, maybe you could consider helping out here”---isn’t going to cut it. It won’t work. If prayer is going to be transformative it’s got to be something that is insisting on being in relationship, and on change here and now, with the kinds of expectation we hear in Jesus’ prayer: bring thy reign on earth, give us this day what we need to survive, help us to forgive others because we know experiencing your forgiveness depends on that, help us to avoid that which will lead us from your path of faith, hope, and love, for all my life is about your reign, or the kind of expectation we find in St. Francis’ bold prayer: make me an instrument of your peace, where there is hatred-let me sow love, where there is injury let me bring healing, where there is sin let me bring forgiveness, so transform me that I can focus more on loving others rather than worrying so much about not being loved enough.

These are the kinds of prayers that say: “God, I want to be in relationship with you, change the universe starting with me.” They are the kind of prayers that create a different relationship to the God reality, that change the orbit of our planets, that set in motion a different alignment of ourselves to ourselves, our world, and our universe, in such a way that the unexpected happens, new ways of being and acting become possible, strange things promising something better.

I’m also struck by the statement that this kind of passionate persistent prayer is helpful in order to “not lose heart.” What a powerful image. It’s possible to live our lives without heart. In order to live with a heart there are things we need to do. If passionate persistent prayer is necessary to keep faith and not lose heart, and so that we can unleash the power of heaven and God in our lives and world, I think it has its counterpart in what we require to be saved and to help save others. I know that’s language that most of us don’t normally feel comfortable with, but

please bear with me.

Several weeks ago I talked about Harry Potters vision of how to make being lost into a means of blessing. Today I want to talk about what's at the heart of destructive lostness, which is isolation, and what's required to deliver us from the dominion of isolation.

Isolation has been on my mind a lot lately. I've been struck by how much isolation seems so fundamental to being controlled by addiction: alcoholism, drug abuse, other kinds of addiction. I've been struck by how central it is to the suffering of mental and emotional illness, how much worse isolation makes things like depression, schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorders, anxiety attacks, and the myriad of other disorders we can suffer from. I've been struck by how often relationships, friendships, partnerships, marriages, communities-- break down--when folks get isolated. When we get isolated, when we become cut off from others, it is so easy to lose touch with reality, to become paranoid, to become controlled by the illusions and delusions we project onto others, or that they project onto us.

Working with the ReEntry program I'm struck by how hard it is for folks to overcome their isolation. People coming out of prison often fear letting go of their isolation yet even when they are determined to they discover others not wanting to give them work, or have them live near them, or interact with them. This week we began a creative arts group for those going through reentry and one of the things the men talked about was how their not wanting to return to the dog eat dog world of street life -- means in essence for them--being alone most of the time, not having any place to go or things to do--because only the street seems to really welcome them.

I was struck by Thalia Johnson's sermon several months ago of what it means to be a youth who is lesbian, gay, transgender or bisexual, living in a rural area--how that can leave you feeling totally isolated-- cut off from your family, your friends, people in your school and community and with no means of reaching out beyond them. One third of TBLG youth or young adults seriously consider suicide. Of those who do commit suicide it is far more likely to happen among those who have not being able to be open about their orientation. That's why you'll see buttons that say silence = death because that's what it in fact means for many youth.

Thinking about how critical the issue of isolation is for people coming out of prison, or for TBLG youth, has made me think about the isolation of those living around me. I live on a one block dead end street in middle class Ann Arbor. There are only ten houses on the block. In one house a man lives who lost his family and his life after he went over the edge and had a stand off with the police. He rarely seems to talk to anyone. Another house stands empty because the husband got hooked on crack and his wife and kids left him. Anther house, in the past had trouble with domestic violence. Visiting my old neighborhood in Rochester I was struck by how I could name nearly that same level of significant problems on our block there. We no longer seem to have any community norms and forms for breaking through such deadly isolation on a neighborhood level. Thankfully, at least the 12 step groups help do that for individuals.

Reading my mom's memoir recently, I was also struck by the painful isolation her family

fought: because their dad left the family, because they were poor, because they were considered too religious and therefore not cool by the wealthier kids. Now I see my mother and other older people I love having to constantly struggle against isolation because of disabilities like hearing loss, loss of sight, difficulty in getting around, declining energy, projections that lead others to no longer really taking them seriously, or listen to them, or think they don't want to engage in real life, or their fear that this is how they are viewed.

I think of myself as a young person, and how one move after another left me increasingly isolated until finally, there was no one I felt I could really talk to and the havoc that came of that. Isolation may not be the same thing as hell, but I don't think there is any hell without isolation. Isolation may not result in hell, but I don't think you land in hell without getting really isolated. If this is true this issue of isolation is really serious stuff because I think, on one level, it feels like we live in a centrifuge that is constantly pushing us into greater isolation unless we resist it.

Okay, so that's the bad news. What's the good news?

Maybe I'll start with Jesus' statement that he will make his disciples fishers of people. I never liked that statement. It sounded demeaning, like treating others like objects. I don't want to treat others like objects and I don't want them to treat me that way. But reflecting on all this stuff about isolation and what enables people to break through it, including what enabled me to begin to overcome my own isolation, has made me reinterpret this image as being about creating the webs of grace which enable us to live and move and have our being. These webs, seem to me, the way God works through the material world and through people to help us find our way back into our humanity. This means that when we're caught by such nets, it's not about being controlled, it's about finding lifelines that allow us to connect back up to ourselves, the world, and the universe.

Despite all the forces pushing my mom and her family into shame and invisibility, it only took a few courageous people reaching out and loving my mom and her siblings for them to survive. Two older women befriended my mom when she was in High school. Along with her mother they became her best friends and helped her keep her seemingly ridiculous hopes and dreams alive. Later another woman befriended my mom and decided to put her through college at Vassar. That kind of generosity is almost unbelievable. All my life I've seen my mom reach out and sustain others. Even in college she put another young woman through college just by collecting funds from her new wealthy friends. But the reality is my mom might wouldn't have been able to help others the way she's been able to -- and might not even had made it-- if there hadn't of been grace embodied in these folks like her mother and these three other women. Gratefulness is about acknowledging our dependency on others, something we often don't like to admit. While telling a story of great sorrow my mom's book also sings with gratefulness to the universe that caught her.

I think of myself at one point so overcome by darkness within and cut off from help without-- that I experienced myself as one of the walking dead--one who was unlikely to ever live again. What and who enabled me to make my way back to life?: some devoted close friends, getting

involved in the Catholic Worker movement and the small Eucharist community at Canterbury House where I found a healthier vision of Christianity (for bad Christianity was part of my illness), Buzz Alexander's creating spaces for real dialogue in his classes at the University of Michigan, all these helping me to create a different kind of relationship to myself, my friends, and my family and opening up blessing upon blessing.

I think of the story Thalia Johnson shared at the recent Oasis retreat about her efforts to help create a web of support for TBLG youth in Livingston county. They started with getting good books for their local library, because the High School would not allow such books in its library. Those books became so popular among the youth in the area that those youth formed a gay straight alliance at Livingstone High school. Now they even have a new principal who is affirming. Slowly they are moving to develop a PFLAG chapter. The web grows and with each link becomes the possibility that one more youth will be able to accept and affirm who they are and bring their gift to others and the world.

I see what's happening with the web of grace that's beginning to develop around Reentry in Washtenaw County. Washtenaw County has the highest recidivism rate in the state. The last figures were that 76% of those coming out of prison were back in prison within two years. Now I see webs of support growing:

- *Work Skills--an organization whose staff previously worked primarily with developmentally disabled adults-- now bringing all their affirming energy to focus on people who have never been in the work force, or have been cut off from it for years,

- *Power Inc. an outgrowth a ministry of a congregation in Ypsilanti that primarily focused on helping folks in the African American community -- now bringing all their positive supportive energy to focus on individuals trying to find their way back into being in good relationship with the community,

- *the Mentoring Program that the MPRI is creating, offering the possibility of people -- always having someone they can call during the first 90 days they are out of prison,

- *the Shelter Association, Avalon Housing, and Catholic Social Services, all bringing the skills and wisdom they've developed about how to help poor people find housing and how to support them in maintaining it.

- *Dawn Farms doing the same thing for folks with addiction problems.

It is like web upon web is coming into existence to support people coming out of prison. All these webs don't guarantee anything, especially in a time where there is a shortage of jobs, a shortage of affordable housing, not enough treatment available for folks with addictions or with mental or emotional disabilities. But each new strand in the web at least makes it that much more possible that more folks will find their way out of their isolation and towards what ever it is that helps them to succeed.

In our scriptures today we hear the prophet Jeremiah say the time of destruction and desolation is coming to an end, soon will be the time of planting, building, and new growth. Soon people will begin to experience grace upon grace: people no longer inheriting the consequences

of the sins of their parents, people no longer being lost because of ignorance. The time is coming when everyone will have a fresh start, everyone will know the way of God from within their own hearts, everyone will know God for themselves through experiencing God's forgiveness.

Grace upon grace. If for the Spirit to act powerfully in our lives and world, it requires a kind of passionate persistent prayer, I think when we look at our lives we can also see that most of us require grace upon grace to live fully, move freely, and be who we care capable of being. Let us this day acknowledge our dependency on these webs of grace, God the Spirit working in and through the material world and those who care for us. Coming out of that place of gratefulness, let us be about creating and sustaining such webs of grace for others. For if we are willing, God is able and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen