

“Habits of the Heart”
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 Mark 8:31-37

I know that I speak for all of us when I begin by saying a word of gratitude to the way our worship committee is helping us interpret the season of Lent. The purple cloth draped over the cross reminds us that the cross is a symbol that embodies the reality that God’s love is expressed in God’s willingness to suffer on our behalf. On the window ledges the Bibles and candles remind us of the light of the Holy Spirit that gives life to God’s word to us, and I was especially struck by the altar setting with the purple candles held by candleholders that are uneven, they are out of balance.

How did that first strike you? Did it seem odd? Did you wonder why they weren’t matching? When I first looked at them I had to stop and look for a while. I felt greatly encouraged by their being out of balance, because I think, as symbols, they are very helpful in prodding us into seeing the depth and breadth of love expressed in the cross.

A couple weeks ago we were watching Bill Moyers on Friday evening on PBS. One of his guests was a very wise and seasoned theologian named Parker Palmer.¹ Their conversation wasn’t specifically about the season of Lent; they talked more in the context of the pain and anxiety in our country these days, especially concerning the condition of our economy. But in their conversation Parker Palmer had some insights about the “pursuit of happiness” that we hold to be sacred, especially here in the United States, and those insights are very relevant to the season of Lent and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He made the point that it is especially in hard times, because they are forced on us, that we have the potential to learn new “habits of the heart,”² and he went on to name one especially important habit this way, the capacity “to hold the tension between reality, the way things are, on the one hand and possibility, the vision for the way things could be, on the other hand. There is always a gap, he actually called it a tragic gap, between reality and possibility. He called it tragic, not necessarily because it is very sad, but because it requires real spiritual energy to hold those two dimensions in tension with one another.

Reality is seeing all the consequences of the difficult conditions that surround us. Possibility is the capacity of faith to believe in a vision of hope for our world. Both are necessary, but I would not underestimate the power of love that is required to hold those two dynamics in creative tension with each other.

Now, to tell the truth, I’m not sure the worship committee had all or any of that in mind, but at least intuitively I believe it is a dynamic deeply imbedded in every human heart. I believe it was that dynamic that Jesus spoke about and taught

¹ Bill Moyers Journal of February 20, 2009. Transcript at www.pbs.org/moyers/journal

² This phrase was first coined by his mentor Robert Bellah.

about and argued about in today's gospel lesson, but the dynamic goes even deeper in our tradition of faith. That dynamic is contained within the relationship between Abram and Sarai and Yahweh, a portion of which we heard in the Old Testament reading today.

The reality there was that Abram was 99 years old, and his wife Sarai had not yet conceived a child. The reality was that Abram had been in relationship with Yahweh since he was 75 years old when Yahweh had first promised Abram that he would be the father of a great nation. Abram had obeyed and a lot had happened in the last 24 years, but Sarai having a child was not one of them. The reality was that, as Sarai puts it, we are so old we are as good as dead. That's the reality.

The possibility was in stark contrast to that. At first, back in Chapter 12 Yahweh promised Abram to make his descendants into a great nation, but Yahweh keeps elevating the possibility of the promise so that here in Chapter 17 the promise is that Abram will be the father of, not one nation, but many nations. The gap between reality and possibility keeps getting increased, Abram and Sarai keep getting older, Yahweh's projections for the future keep getting expanded.

What is their reaction to this, at first Abram and Sarai think this is so preposterous that they just laugh, then Abram adopts a compromise position, how about letting Ishmael, my son by Hagar inherit what God has promised, at least that sounds a little more reasonable. Both are very normal responses, but neither one holds both the reality and possibility of God's promise in tension with each other.

That requires nothing less than the transformation of love. The transformation is embodied in that everyone involved undergoes a name change. Abram becomes Abraham, Sarai becomes Sarah, and you may not have noticed it but Yahweh gives himself another name, first time it is used in the Bible. He says, I am God Almighty, in the Hebrew El Shaddai. There is a richness of meaning in that Hebrew name. El was a commonly used name for all the tribal gods of the region but El Shaddai is like saying, "I am the God of the highest mountain AND I am the God of the lowest valley." I am God who inhabits all the dimensions of creation and I am the God who is deeply imbedded in the entire range of human experience.

If this feels like it is all too much for our understanding, it is because it is. The more the gap widens between the candles of reality and possibility the greater the love that is required to hold them in dynamic tension with each other. Even the love required is beyond our capacity; we turn to God in faith seeking that love.

The background for the gospel lesson today is quite a bit different than the circumstances of Abraham and Sarah; the disciples felt that Jesus ministry was

on an upward trajectory. Things were actually going better than any of them had expected. The healings were attracting the attention of thousands. In an incredible outpouring of compassion Jesus had empowered the feeding of thousands. It was true that there was increasing tension with the religious leaders, but Jesus' teachings had real authority behind them and held out such hope that surely they would inevitably come around. The signs were growing that this was a movement with both momentum and real potential.

To use the analogy of the gap between the candles, it could have very well appeared to the disciples that the gap between reality and possibility was actually narrowing. So when Jesus asks the disciples who do people say that I am, their responses all elevate the hope of the possibilities of his mission. Then Peter dares to say the unsayable, you are the Messiah, the holy one of God. Isn't that it? This would have been the perfect occasion to plan a great strategy for victory.

But Jesus uses this as an occasion to underline and emphasize the dynamic tension between reality and possibility. He does not seek to diminish the hopes of all that is contained in being named Messiah, but he prefers to name himself as the Son of Man, who is the one who will demonstrate to us what it truly means to be a human being.

He teaches about the narrow way, the unavoidable necessity of engaging with suffering and the humbleness of risking dealing with the challenges of life as they are fully present. Jesus is not an uninvolved, detached teacher here. He fully inhabits his own skin, and he is not immune from any of the struggles of habits of the heart that are very familiar to the rest of us.

Peter is listening intently to his master who he has just named as Messiah and he is not enthusiastic at all about this teaching about the necessity of suffering. Peter, like all of us, longs for divine things, but also like all of us, he is struggling with human things. This talk about suffering is very understandably not easy teaching for Peter so he rebukes Jesus and Jesus rebukes him right back calling him Satan and chastising him for setting his mind on human things rather than divine things. I can understand Peter's rebuke of Jesus, and I can't help but wonder if the intensity of Jesus' rebuke of Peter indicates that he is not just correcting Peter but also reminding himself of where his focus also must be. After all, Jesus was tempted in all ways as we are tempted.

That is a telling exchange between Peter and Jesus. It tells us that they cared enough about each other to call each other out. That tells us something about the intimacy of their friendship. They loved each other enough to hold the tension between them of reality and possibility, between human things and divine things. The relationship between the two must always be held together by love.

I hope you take time to give your attention to the inserts we are providing for Lent. If you look on the back cover you will see that the art work is done by Jan

Richardson. You may not know that Jan is a United Methodist Clergy here in the Florida Conference. She gave up a pastoral appointment to pursue her art and writing on a full time basis. I always look forward to seeing her at Annual Conference. If you look her up on the web you will be rewarded. Jan is also a part of a group who are obedient to Benedictine vows. She wrote about this gospel passage this week:

“Not all are called into a Benedictine way of life—and that’s one of the things that Benedict is very clear about. Yet Christ calls each of us to a path that enables us to find and follow the presence of the holy in **the midst of being human, not in spite of being human**. The God who became incarnate and wore flesh beckons us to go into the deeps of our humanity, to meet the God who dwells there, and to reckon with all that would keep us from relationship with that God.”³

This is not an easy path and it is not for any of us to impose it upon another, but it is Jesus invitation to each of us especially in this time of Lent. I don’t know anyone who is neutral or untouched by experiences of death. The hope and possibility that Christ offers to each of us is the potential for transformation. It is a profoundly personal experience.

Even the greatest among us has much to learn from the least. Mother Teresa told of taking some rice to a family of nine that was starving. She brought them enough rice to prepare just a few meals, but the woman divided the rice into two piles and put one pile in a bag and started to leave. Mother Teresa asked her where she was going. The woman said that she was going to visit another family that she knew was also starving. Even in the reality of her needs she had the love to be mindful of the possibilities of reaching out to another.

Do we have the habits of the heart to creatively hold in love the gap between the reality and possibility?

We all may be tempted to look for the grand gesture, but Jesus didn’t love that way. One day a wealthy man went to his preacher with a check for \$50,000 made out to the church. He handed it to the preacher, and the preacher looked at it. It was a lot of money. He handed it back to him. The man looked at the Pastor with a question. The preacher said, “I tell you what. Go and cash in that check for \$100 bills and put \$100 in the plate every time you come to church and use the rest to do the Lord’s work.

The man protested, “But that will take the rest of my life!”
“That’s right,” said the preacher, “That is exactly the point!”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Rev Stephen Hoffman
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³ <http://paintedprayerbook.com> for March 3, 2009