

Joys and Difficulties of Lenten Practices

Last month Lori and I spent two wonderful weeks in central California. We visited two National Parks (Yosemite and Sequoia) within driving distance of Fresno where we were visiting old friends. And when we were in the San Francisco area visiting other friends we spent time among the giant coastal redwoods. As a result I resonate especially with the Psalm: “I lift up my eyes to the hills.” Yosemite has to be one of the most sacred places on our continent, and the redwoods are equally wonderful; it’s hard not to be in silent awe there.

Our time in these glorious places was an opportunity to begin my Lenten practices, and it helped me understand better what is being asked of us as we seek redemption during this holy season. Our Lenten prayers should be less about prayers of forgiveness and more about seeking “God within us.” And around us. For Lenten practices are about spiritual transformation, not mainly morality, about faith rather than adhering to the law.

As Romans says, “If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to

all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”).”

The Pharisees have gotten a bad rap (which is partly deserved as they did seek to have Jesus tried for blasphemy), but not all of them viewed Jesus as a threat or as blasphemous. In many episodes of the TV show “The Chosen” (which we have recommended highly to many of you) there is a sympathetic depiction of Nicodemus. This gripping series is mainly about Jesus’ followers rather than about him. I especially identify with the scholar, Nicodemus, as he undergoes a transformation through his reflections on Jesus and his words and actions.

Like you and me, at first Jesus’ radical (but simple) message, and his remarkable actions such as his healings, are met with incredulity and incomprehension by Nicodemus. Then we watch as Nicodemus’ faith (his theology or ideology, especially) is weakened and then transformed by what he hears and sees. Thus Nicodemus, like many of us, has a crisis of faith. In challenging Nicodemus Jesus asks him to soften or open up his world view to a new and deeper perspective. “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

For most of us here our faith is built around and is guided by the Episcopal tradition. We are especially fond of Episcopal rituals; we love the bells and whistles that have been honed over several centuries. Richard Rohr suggests that in being wedded to and guided by our inherited doctrines and rituals we, like the Catholics he criticizes, can overlook the true origins of Christianity with the desert mothers and fathers. (And, I would add, an event we witnessed last week--Jesus' desert experience.)

Hear what the desert mothers and fathers are saying:

“Until the mind is freed from the multitudes of thoughts, and has achieved the single simplicity of purity, it cannot experience spiritual knowledge.” (Isaac of Syria)

Or: Callistus and Ignatius taught: “Collect your mind from its customary circling and wandering outside, and quietly lead it into the heart by way of breathing.”

Sounds a lot like Buddhist meditation, doesn't it? I believe this is the heart of what our Lenten practices should be like. Jesus tells Nicodemus that his studious efforts to be a good Jew (like ours to be good Christians) are not enough. He needs to follow Jesus' example and dive into his internal life. Where he will meet his deeper self and God.

There was something magical, ethereal, beyond comprehension in Yosemite valley and in Muir Woods near San Francisco. As we walked through the valley and then through the Muir Woods we saw ourselves in perspective. The mountains, the great waterfalls, the 300 feet high redwoods helped us feel our insignificance and simultaneous connections to creation. I could tell, by their hushed silence, that others were having similar experiences, and our common individual diminishment created a strong sense of being fellow travelers. I believe Jesus' message is easier to comprehend in such places because rationality so obviously fails to understand what one experiences in such overwhelming natural places. To more fully experience being under the holy Half Dome that transfixed John Muir a century and half ago, you have to open yourself to something beyond yourself and your usual perspective. While it is easier in places like Yosemite to be taken out of our selves than in the quiet of our studies or church, such a transformation can happen anywhere.

Some of you are familiar with Lori's monthly newsletter about her writing. (I recommend you ask to be on her mailing list.) In her most recent newsletter she describes how experiencing the migration of a half million sandhill cranes in central Nebraska was awe inspiring for us, like being in Yosemite or among giant coastal redwoods. But you don't have to travel so

far or be overwhelmed by the enormity of nature to be taken out of your everyday self. This past week I spent time at the wetlands just south of Iowa City where various birds are celebrating the coming of spring. The geese are pairing up and the male geese are filled with testosterone as they protect their females. But I was most transfixed by another migration: the return of the male redwing blackbirds. All of a sudden they're here, claiming territory and preparing for the coming of the females when they will dance through the sky and after much of a week bring their mate back to the place they've staked out. Experiencing the magic of their return and anticipating the excitement to come, my ordinary thoughts disappeared, as did my sense of time. Tears of gratitude ran down my face as I felt joy at being a part of such a miracle.

The desert mothers and fathers can lead us to experience a oneness with nature and the gratitude that follows. But they can also help us experience another sense of 'desert'. Any deep internal journey can open wounds that can be difficult to deal with. Mixed with my delight about blackbird migration was a sense of sadness, even grief realizing how few blackbirds there were compared to just a few years ago. I was experiencing first hand what scientists tell us: between 40-80% of birds have disappeared in our lifetimes, and many species have become extinct.

When we were in the Muir Woods among the giant coastal redwoods, besides being overwhelmed with awe and gratitude, suddenly I revisited the greatest personal grief of my life--my divorce from my first wife. I have worked through that painful experience often and pretty well, but such wounds leave scars and there is always more to learn. One of the most important lessons Jesus is trying to teach us is that it's most crucial we enter into our pain and sadness and grief if we are serious about our spiritual lives. He certainly faced his inner shadows or wrestled with his demons, however you describe the bottom of his desert meditation.

Transformations of any kind, but especially of such a radical change in perspective and behaviors, involve great pain and difficulties. Especially that of working through grief at the dying of the old self, the old beliefs and habits. John Chryssavgis puts it this way: "The desert is a place of spiritual revolution, not of personal retreat. It is a place of inner protest, not outward peace. It is a place of deep encounter, not of superficial escape. It is a place of repentance, not recuperation. Living in the desert does not mean living without people; it means living for God."

This is a deeply spiritual matter, one that Jesus is teaching us when he says "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." The source and

perspective of this difficult transformation is God, a power and being that encompasses and transcends us as individuals.

I wish you well in your Lenten practices. May you dive in and drink deeply of the spiritual sustenance that is there for all of us; and may you emerge even more full of love for and awe of God, nature, and other people.