



SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2010

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Mark 1:29-32

There lived a theologian in the 20th century whose early childhood was shaped by the racially segregated south. Later in life, he traveled to India, visited with Gandhi and studied the ways of satyagraha, non-violent resistance. He was an African American pastor and philosopher, deeply rooted in the struggle for civil rights. Many of you might think I'm talking about Dr. King, but I'm actually talking about one of Dr. King's mentors. I am talking about a public intellectual and one of the finest Christians that ever followed in the footsteps of Jesus. I'm talking about Howard Thurman. His theology and writings carry great spiritual weight for me. His picture is in my office; his books line my shelves. I go back to him again and again.

I rarely trust anyone talking about God whose had a cushy life. And Thurman's life was far from cushy. This was a man who experienced the depths of despair-both in his runs ups with racism and the loss of his first wife to tuberculosis-and a man who experienced the heights of joy: he had two children, was the first African American dean at Marsh Chapel at Boston University and he started the first racially integrated church in America. His life experience, both in despair and joy, enabled him to reflect upon the Gospel with a depth of wisdom unparalleled. And perhaps more importantly, he lived that Gospel.

Now Howard Thurman wrote many brilliant things, said many brilliant things, did many brilliant things. But there is one thing Howard Thurman wrote, in his work "Deep River" that has influenced me more than any other piece of theological writing. Ironically: it's only one sentence. Reflecting upon God's creative mind and spirit at the core of the cosmos, Thurmans writes: "This is the great disclosure: that there is at the heart of life a Heart."

This phrase has become a pastoral philosophy for me, a sturdy concept that secures my faith and inspires my service to others. This phrase has become a mantra of sorts, a prayer that I repeat often. "there is at the heart of life a Heart."

Thurman is of course disclosing that "the heart" at the heart of life is God's heart. It is the heart of love that has no beginning and no end. It is the pulse of all the Earth, all creation, all creatures...human and animal alike. The heart that gathers us in and holds us forever. The heart of Word made Flesh. A heart that rolls back the heaviest stone and revives crucified bodies. A holy heart. A hard working heart. An eternally beating heart. God's heart. At the heart of life. Thurman says and I believe: there is at the heart of life a Heart.

It's a hard thing to believe sometimes, a hard truth to live sometimes. Times like now. Times when the loudest voices in the public square are Christian ones calling for Quran burning, Muslim ones inciting violence against all Americans. Times when we see floods take out entire Pakistani villages and an Earthquake shatter the nation of Haiti. Times when unemployed, uninsured and homeless people are increasing by the day in our home state of Michigan. Times when youth in battle creek fear their physical safety in light of increased violence in public schools.

My agnostic friends, my atheist friends, my friends who profess the values of secular humanism: they say to me, "Emily, how can you possibly look at all this suffering, all this violence and think there's a God? Emily Joye, How can you possibly believe that there is a Heart at the heart of life?"

Do not all human beings have a heart? Literally?? Is there not a rhythmic pulse to the seasons of the Earth? Individual

bodies may die and earthly seasons may pass one into the other, but life goes on because there is a center piece that beats and pulses and pumps energy and circulates flow, life goes on because there is a multiplying and dying and birthing again kind of creativity that does not quit. We all participate in that process and all of us dwell as a part of that center. It is a center that does everything it can to give us the fullness of life during our lifetime, AND it is a center that existed before us and will continue to exist when we are gone. At the heart of life is a Heart and it is the gathering center whether we acknowledge it or have a proper name for it or whether we grant it permission to permeate our consciousness.

Our biblical text this morning gives a striking image, one that lends itself to thinking about this center/piece. Consider "the whole city gathered around the door." Jesus leaves the temple, finds his friends and gets down to the business of healing. He starts with Simon's mom. The text tells us: He came. He took her by the hand. He lifted her up. That's a recipe for healing if I've ever heard one; any of us can do that. Presumably what happens between Jesus and Simon's mom, what happens between healer and healed happens in the late morning or early afternoon. And by nighttime, the entire city of Capernaum is gathered around the door. Word apparently travels fast in Capernaum. Or perhaps there was a need so deep and widespread that just a rumor of healing gathered these citizens together.

So what was that need? What could possibly draw that many people to a single place so quickly? It tells us in verse 32 that "they" (meaning the disciples) brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And then in the next verse, verse 33 it says the entire city was gathered. Let's use a little deductive logic here: We figure if a) they brought all the people in town who were sick and demon-possessed b) as a result the whole city was gathered c) there was no one in Capernaum unaffected by sickness and demon possession.

Or another way of stating this conclusion: everyone in Capernaum was drawn closer to that door because of what was behind that door. Everyone was drawn closer by the hope of healing, by the promise of potential wholeness. Can you imagine if there was something or someone in Battle Creek that could ensure debt forgiveness and jobs for our young people? Or give adequate healthcare to every newborn? Or make sure our elderly were comfortable in the last years of their lives? Could you imagine what would happen if a wondering soul came into Battle Creek with a fool-proof way of eliminating poverty? We might all just gather for that. Not so different: Capernaum and Battle Creek. None of us go unaffected. All of us have hope in healing and potential wholeness. And if you think I'm stretching the bible to fit modern times: just think about the sickness that the stress of financial burdens can cause and think about demons like addiction and self-mutilation that take up residence in people who have lost hope. Believe it: there is sickness and demon possession in the 21st century. This is not a stretch. This is real life, real bible, real people. Back then, today. But you know what? Something tells me that folks back then didn't confuse the door with what was behind it.

We've spent the last 5 weeks in worship and book study focusing on "The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why" by Phyllis Tickle. This weekend we spent a good deal of time at our Church Council retreat reflecting on Tickle's book. Tom and I have this book all up in this Church because we believe this book has something fundamental-not fundamentalist-but fundamental to provoke in us. And that fundamental provoking has to do with the issue of authority.

Tickle argues that we are in a time of reformation, that we are living in an age when, yet again, Christianity is reconsidering and reforming itself. And she is asking us during this time of reformation to locate our source of authority. She is asking all of us: mainliners, liturgicals,

conservatives and renewalists. She is asking all of us: those who want change, those who want things to remain the same, and those who want things to go back to the way they were. She is asking all of us: insiders, outsiders and those who hang around the door. She is asking us: what is at the gathering center of your life? What draws you closer? What do you-first congregational church-trust and rely on as a faith community?

Now I want us to go back to Capernaum for a moment, back to the citizens gathered at the door, back to the people seeking healing, back to a people of hope who believe what's behind that door can save them. Doorways are human constructions. They are entry points. And churches are human constructions, entry points. And pastors are human constructions, entry points. Even the bible comes from human hands and hearts and mind. Even the bible is just an entry point. But none of these things, on their own, should be the locus of our authority. None of these things should be the gathering center of our lives.

The gathering center of our lives has been and should always be the incarnation. Behind that Capernaum door was the person Jesus Christ, the fullness of God disclosed in a life of unexpected and miraculous birth, a life of fervent prayer, a life that came to the aid of other lives by touching and lifting them up, a life that challenged injustice and corruption, a life that laid itself down in loving sacrifice, a life of forgiveness, a life that made possible and still makes possible today the resurrection of people everywhere. It is a life that still breathes and moves in us in the form of the Holy Spirit.

What draws us closer to that life is our need for healing, our need for wholeness, our need for connection to others who are approaching the entry points. We approach that door for ourselves sometimes and other times we carry our loved ones to that door. But it's not the door itself, which is just an entry point. It's not the church or the pastor or the bible

that we seek: it's the gathering center, it's the heart at the heart of life.

Today, we are a whole congregation gathered. We kick off the church year today. This place and time are both entry points. I don't know why you've been drawn closer to this building, to this community, to these pastors, or this bible today. But won't you come in? and be touched? and lifted up? Won't you seek with us what's behind, beyond and yes, partially inside these walls? We may not always get it right, but on our best days we are drawn here in the need of healing and wholeness and togetherness, gathered together to be salt of the Earth and light of the world. And on our best days, we enter together, enter the heart of God, a heart that beats with nothing other than the love of amazing grace.

Amen

