

Reflections by Rob Glenn and Judy York
March 26, 2017

Rob Glenn
Ephesians 5:8-9 & John 9:4-5

This is a reading from a letter from Paul to the Ephesians:

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light- for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.

Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

The opposition of light and darkness is one of the great themes of the Old and New Testaments.

It has been there from the beginning in Genesis:

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.

As Randy often notes, God did not eliminate darkness, it remains in opposition to the light.

This opposition is also a journey for Paul in Ephesians, a journey from darkness to light, from death to life, from sleep to wake, from ignorance to "all that is good and right and true."

This theme appears again in the reading for today from the Gospel of John - the story of the blind man who is given his sight by the works of Jesus.

Jesus proclaims "I am the light of the world."

Although Jesus gives sight to the blind man (the metaphorical journey from darkness to light), there is a problem because Jesus performs that act on the Sabbath, and that, for some of the Pharisees, is a big problem because work on the Sabbath is against the law of God.

The journey from darkness to light, from ignorance to understanding, is not an easy one. In this story, the system, the law, as the Pharisees duly note, prohibits Jesus from showing us the truth.

But Jesus is prepared for this argument.

He says: "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

Some of the Pharisees near Jesus heard him say this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?"

Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

One thing occurred to me as I read this:

Jesus would have been awesome on Twitter.

In our Sunday seminar we have been studying racism in the United States. This semester we have been reading the book "Waking up White." An examination of white privilege in the United States by Debby Irving.

In Chapter 5, Irving asks this question: "How is it possible that I was both a good person and utterly clueless."

Put another way, how is it that one can live in the light but remain in the darkness.

Irving's answer is in part that once she saw herself as part of a corrupt system, she recognized herself as part of the problem.

To be honest with you I have always thought of myself as a good person in terms of race in America. I mean I am for affirmative action, civil and voting rights and equality. I am from innocent New England, not the guilty South.

But what I did not know until recently is the extent to which the system I lived in, that I am benefiting from, was working in exactly the opposite direction.

Moreover, the system was purposely hiding the whole truth from me. No one ever told me about the New England merchants who made their fortunes on the slave trade in the Caribbean, or the racist application of the GI Bill and the fair housing act (two of the most progressive social programs ever enacted in the United States).

There is so much of our history that remains in the darkness.

So in this system that we live in, how does one seek the light?

One way is to listen to the voices from outside the system.

This is an excerpt from an essay written by James Baldwin that appears in his book "The Fire Next Time" published in 1963.

The Essay is framed as a letter to his 14 year old nephew James:

Please try to be clear, dear James, through the storm which rages about your youthful head today, about the reality which lies behind the words "acceptance" and "integration." There is no reason for you to try to become like white men and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them, and I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love, for these innocent people have no other hope. They are in effect still trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men.

They are trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.

"How is it possible that I was both a good person and utterly clueless."

Some of the Pharisees near Jesus heard him say this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?"

Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

Reflection by Judy York
Psalm 23

Psalm 23 - adapted by Nan Merrill

O my Beloved, you are my shepherd,
I shall not want;
You bring me to green pastures for rest
and lead me beside still waters
renewing my spirit,
You restore my soul.
You lead me in the path of goodness
to follow Love's way.

Even though I walk through the valley
of the shadow and of death,
I am not afraid;
for you are with me forever;
your rod and your staff they guide me,
they give me strength and comfort.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of all my fears;
you bless me with oil, my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy will follow me
all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the heart of the Beloved
forever.

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So, I wear a lot of hats around here, as many of you know. But in my day job I am an executive coach – walking with small business owners on their personal and professional growth journeys.

Last month I had the great opportunity to attend training that will bring more tools to my practice – helping clients bring awareness to underlying behavioral patterns and exploring possibilities and practices of growing into a new way of operating in their worlds.

I felt so much of my journey over the past four years had called me to this program. It's always hard to articulate those spiritual nudges in a meaningful way. I'll just say that every morning, walking to class, I

could hardly believe I was finally here. I lit up inside, vibrating with each new thing I learned with marvel at how it connected so much with my own story and sense of purpose.

And then, somewhere in the middle of day two or three I had the wind knocked out of me as we began to turn the flashlight inward, and I realized this program was also working to transform me! And, I wasn't sure I had signed up for that!

Specifically, I could see it was stretching me into a particularly tender place - namely touching into my fears around feeling safe in the intimacies of relationship and community which can sometimes cause me the greatest angst. Literally, at one point I felt like running from the room.

Now... I realize this is very ironic considering the personal work I do as a coach and the fact that I'm even standing up here today sharing so vulnerably with you.

I will say this, I have come a long way in my journey. And this church – you in this room – and friends who touch this church have been instrumental in my healing in this space. And, of course, Randy, who has been like a Father-Shepherd to me over the years.

But... apparently (from what I learned in a training room in Ottawa) God is not finished with me yet.

And it can be a cruel irony around calling – often that which calls us the most (in a vocation, in a marriage, in a community) requires us to explore and heal that which is the most difficult for us to face. This is our sacred wound.

It's like the point of a needle that finds its way right into the core and press on that tender space which hurts the most and we start to realize our old tricks and armored defenses are not serving us with where our soul is longing to go.

My take is that more than anything, God wants us to heal. The Universe begs for our wholeness and with this, continuously calls the lost sheep home. And as the shepherd guides the flock, God guides us, gently and sometimes not so gently, to the threshold of transformation, where our hopes and fears collide into a messy soup of mystery, paradox, and promise. From the place of our ego's familiar comfort towards what our unfettered soul longs for.

Richard Rohr says, "Unfortunately, we have the natural instinct to fix pain, to control it, or even, foolishly, to try to understand it. The ego always insists on understanding. That's why Jesus praises a certain quality even more than love, and he calls it faith. It's the ability to stand in liminal space, to stand on the threshold, to hold the contraries, until you move to a deeper level where it all eventually makes sense in the great scheme of God and grace."

Liminal space is Jesus's walk into the wilderness – where what our ego rests on is tested, where our identity shifts, and new possibilities emerge. It is a place of danger, chaos, and ambiguity (some call "crazy space"!) and a place of solitude, nourishment and revelation if we can hold the tension of uncertainty long enough to see the Light break through.

And here we are as a community with Randy's retirement on the horizon and the big question - what will come to fill this gaping hole in our chest? Our old world is beginning to fall apart, and there will be many miles of uncertainty (and perhaps fear) until a bigger world is revealed. How do we walk that journey together? How do we embrace this cloud of unknowing? How do we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and know God is with us, preparing a table before us in the presence of all our fears?

The psalmist is inviting us, here, to walk in faith that we are held and guided by a larger force. It's an invitation to welcome our fears to the table, sit and, perhaps, dine with them, and follow their threads down until we feel the point of the needle pressing onto the core of that sacred wound. And ask ourselves: What inside of us is longing to be healed? What is begging for transformation? And then scoop that up ever so tenderly in our arms, and bravely walk into it with Love as our guide.

It is not that we shouldn't have fears. Because we have fears. It's natural. But fear and darkness do not have the last say in who we are.

Pause. Rest. Soak yourself in green pastures by still waters, and open to the invitation: "What would Love do?" "What is the Spirit calling forth in you?" And then take a deep breath and take the next best step on that path.

This is the School of Love. Surely not the high mountain monastery I had hoped for.

"There is a hard truth to be told:" says Parker Palmer, "before spring becomes beautiful, it is plug ugly, nothing but mud and muck. I have walked in the early spring through fields that will suck your boots off, a world so wet and woeful it makes you yearn for the return of ice. But in that muddy mess, the conditions for rebirth are being created."

I have been reborn in this community many, many times. And look forward to many more years of ongoing transformation as, together, we continue to wander into and out of the wilderness in faith and in love.

God is with us! Ever calling us to the threshold, walking with us in the muck of fear and uncertainty, and, with arms wide open, welcoming us home with a whisper on the wind: "I love you and you are mine."

AMEN