

August 9, 2015 Proper 14 B

It's always stressful to take the pulpit as a layperson. However, we need to remind ourselves that we are all part of a community of faith and as such we are charged with nurturing and supporting each other's spiritual journey. We may not be biblical scholars but we all have the spiritual experience and wisdom that come from that common journey.

My own spiritual discipline is continuously changing, just as life changes around me. In recent years I have tried to stop questioning and thinking so much about my beliefs and instead start trying to experientially live them. Recently my focus has centered around 3 words – words that today's lectionary seem to reflect. These are my spiritual triple As: Aware, Align and Allow. Let's look at today's passages and see what I mean.

2nd Samuel

The stories of David and his family in 2nd Samuel would put the scriptwriters of Dallas to shame. We want to ask: is this the same David that Samuel was instructed by God to anoint as King? Is this the same David that wrote so many of those spiritually powerful Psalms? Or for that matter, is this the same David who must have been fully versed in the 10 Commandments and the Law of Moses? Clearly the answer is yes.

Truth is, like David, we all have a shadow side and struggle with our own personal demons. It's part of being human. There are always the old unforgiven resentments, unhealed wounds, buried guilt ... you know, all those things we have done but should not have done and all those things we should have done but did not do! And part of the nature of shadows is that they can float to the surface of our consciousness uninvited, and if we are not careful can emotionally grab us and pull us down in their wake.

So unlike our hero David, we need to practice being **Aware**, so we're prepared to catch these emotions before these emotions catch us. I confess, there are times when, like many people, I greet these uncomfortable and unwelcome emotions by wanting to push them back down, or deny having them or at the very least hide them from the view of others. But this is not an option for those of us who make the choice to grow in Christian maturity.

Now, the moment I experience an emotional shadow surfacing, I try to greet it as an opportunity rather than an enemy; an opportunity to lift up, confront, learn from, heal and release shadows that have cluttered my soul far too long. The truth is, no matter how much we try to deceive ourselves, most of us know our shadows quite well because they have visited us so many times before. So the next time you are AWARE of one of your shadows, - stop immediately, take two or three deep breaths to give some space for the holy, move into your highest self as the witness and observer and pray "Thank you God, now Help Me Please to learn what I need to learn and heal what I need to heal so this shadow can work for me rather than against me".

Ephesians:

Paul, like all of us, understood the importance of the Ten Commandments and adhering to a strong moral code, as well as understood the consequences in our lives when they were broken. In Ephesians however, Paul moved beyond simple obedience to "the law". Instead, when writing to these new Christian converts in Ephesus, Paul prayed that "Christ might dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love ... may be filled with all the fullness of God"; and urged them "to put off their old nature ... and put on a new nature, created after the likeness of God".

Let us remember that these new converts in Ephesus were not Jewish by birth but Gentiles, living in a pagan culture that was frequently corrupt and morally depraved. Many of these converts also came from the lowest stratus of society; slaves, the marginalized and dispossessed. If Paul could challenge these newly minted Christians with such a high expectation, imagine what he would say to us!

Truth is that this challenge to be "new beings in Christ" and to "be in the world but not of it" is a major theme running throughout the New Testament. In fact, the words are so familiar that most of us can hear them and say them without all that much thought. But how might our spiritual journeys change if we actually tried to live them? And this brings us to my second word ... **ALIGN**.

The early church seemed to assume that the Holy Spirit would flow into these new Christians and give them guidance. But in modern society, most Christians are more ambivalent about the Holy Spirit. So how does one go about getting connected – consciously – with the Holy Spirit? Then the thought occurred to me that much of my active day was on mental rote: make the bed, walk the dog, or sit down for that second cup of coffee. During these times my mind often drifted aimlessly around to nothing in particular; what's for dinner, my feet hurt, boy I'd love some iced tea right now etc. Yet we have been taught that the holy is always present around us and that the Kingdom of God is always within us. So that began my experiment with using those times to seek to align to the holy. In other words, focus on trying to stay present, in the present, to the divine presence within me and around me.

Has there been a radical change? Not really. But there has been a gradual and subtle change. Now when I'm in the middle of a stressful situation or an internal shadow surfaces, I will almost automatically go to the thought – **Align** – and I'll stop, take a few deep breath and say a quick prayer like "Help Me God". But it's still a long ways from Saint Paul's challenge and it also touches on that eternal balancing act which we most of us go through in our faith journey... we seek but are not always sure we want to be found, we knock but are not always sure we want the door to open. What is this thing we fear?

JOHN 6

Those enthusiastic seekers who were at the feeding of the 5000 and then sought Jesus out the following day in Capernaum may have felt that Jesus was not as welcoming or impressed with their spiritual ardor as they might have expected. After all, they were the ones who were "in the pews" so to speak at the feast and then took the time and energy to seek him out all the way to Capernaum. And when Jesus suggested that they were merely looking for another free meal, they said no, no. Why, "what must we do to be doing the work of God?" and "What sign do you do that we may see and believe you?"

Jesus answered "Believe" "I am the Bread of Life", but he perhaps understood that what he was offering might not be exactly what they were seeking or even what they were able to fully comprehend. And frequently we have the same problem don't we. But I think that Jesus might have been saying something to the effect that "This is not a one time event, to be

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proved or disproved, this is life changing. I am in the Father and the Father is in me. But you are also invited into that circle, that I may be in you and you in me, that we might be one in the Father.”

And that's the difficulty with the word ALLOW and with what Jesus is offering. We can be AWARE of the divine around us, we might even seek to be ALIGNED to the divine within us, but to ALLOW the divine to direct and guide our lives hits us at one of our deepest fears ... the lose of control. Our egos, our ancient instinct for survival, fight the very thought of letting go of control. ~~We would welcome the guidance of the Holy Spirit of course, but on our terms and with us in charge.~~ But are we really in charge of our own lives?

Perhaps, as we become more fully aware and aligned to the Holy Spirit, we might be able to see Christ's invitation in a different perspective. Paul calls us to be rooted in love and to live out of the "Law of Love". But what often confounds us is that instead we are too often rooted in fear and living out of the stresses, worries and anxieties those fears produce. Perhaps our sense of having control of our lives is an illusion built more on fear than reality. Perhaps when Jesus calls us to "Believe" it is not a matter of creeds but rather a matter of trust. Trust that we can take the risk of letting go of our fears, that we can trust taking the risks inherent in living by the law of love because we can trust that Christ is in us and we are in Christ.

Perhaps, but we will never really know unless we are willing to take that leap of faith and dare to trust. There is so much I do not know but there is one thing of which I have become quite convinced. Belief is a noun and we can make lists of belief to which we are committed. But faith is a verb and can only be expressed by living it out in our lives. Faith is always at the cutting edge of our spiritual journeys. So let keep on "faithing" and sharing our experiences together.

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