

SLD02.20.11 7th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Psalm 119:1-8
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“When Way Closes”

Do you ever get fed up with yourself? Do your own weaknesses and repetitive flaws ever annoy you? Mine do. All the time. You think my limitations drive *you* nuts; try being me!

That’s what I thought about when read German theologian Johannes Baptist Metz, in his little spiritual classic, *Poverty of the Spirit*, when he remarks that, just as God “became human” and took on flesh, so we, too, must take on our own flesh and accept and bless our own particularity, our own *peculiarity*, if you will, in order fully to “become human” ourselves.

I’m not trying to accept and bless my peculiarities; I’m trying to *change* them!

Like being late, for example. I’m always late, which is annoying to me and discourteous to others. I’m trying to change that. Seriously. It’s my New Year’s resolution: quit being late so much. I’ve asked God help with this and I’m really trying, but the best I can say so far is that still, only once in a while am I not late. That’s not impressive progress, in my view. So I keep trying to improve my stats. I want to be better than I am, don’t you?

Not that Metz would disagree with efforts at self-improvement; indeed, he says, it’s not as though we arrive here as some “ready-made” being; we’re all a work in progress, all perpetually something that *can* be, not limited to what already is.

Becoming human is a spiritual adventure, Metz says. A painful experiment, a lot of the time maybe, but lifetime enterprise. A lifetime enterprise for followers of Jesus Christ, he say, even “a mandate from God, ...a mission, a command, a decision.” In

fact, Metz goes so far as to say, becoming fully whom God created us to be, saying “yes” to the self God has given each of us, all our graces and our sins, Metz declares, is “*the categorical imperative*” of the Christian faith.

“You shall lovingly *accept* the humanity entrusted to you!” Metz declares.

German theologians always come across as so confident. “You shall be *obedient* to your destiny! You shall *not* continually try to escape it! You *shall* be true to yourself! You *shall* embrace yourself!”¹

A couple weeks ago, Libba sent a quote from Albert Schweitzer’s book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* in one of her weekly e-mails. I like those e-mails. They give me pause, and a gentle tap of remembrance. Anyway, you may have heard it before; it goes like this:

“He (Jesus) comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”²

We shall learn *in our own experience* Who Jesus is. And, Metz might add, who *we* are.

Jesus comes to us in our own experience, in the particularity of our own lives, in the twists and turns and joys and disappointments of each of our personal experience so that we can learn, in our own experience, Who He is, and who we are.

Which is why, during this “No Way, Way” sermon series we’ve been exploring the various ways God permeates our experience to guide, mold and shape us into the self,

¹ *Poverty of Spirit*, Johannes Baptist Metz, Paulist Press, New York, 1968. pp. 4-5.

² *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Albert Schweitzer, (New York: MacMillan, 1956), p. 403.

not the generic “good Christian, good servant, good person” self, but into the unique expression of God that God created each of us, in our particularity, to be.

Another way of saying it might be, just as God named God’s Self in Christ Jesus, God keeps trying to name God’s Self through each one of us.

John Calvin wrote that “it does not matter whether you start with a search for the knowledge of God or with the search for the knowledge of self. The two are so intertwined one with the other that is impossible always to know which leads and which follows. A search for either will drive on to the other.”³

So, you and I struggle along in the often painful experiment of becoming fully human as we learn, in our own experience Who Jesus is, who we are.

It’s not a linear journey. It’s not exactly a straight shot from birth to maturity to the heart of God, is it. Life’s more like the labyrinth out there forever moving toward and then away from the Source, seemingly randomly. Or like this dossel cloth that Karen designed, with its serpentine wanderings leading to...what...the unknown.

Most of our lives either are, or are fixing to be, complicated, and full of ambiguity and surprises, full of choices we’ve made along the way, some we’re proud of, some not so much; and relationships we’ve cultivated, some healthy, some not so much; and, of course, all kinds of good intentions that often don’t seem to pan out so well.

We’ve talked in this series about what God wants from us – God wants us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. We’ve talked about the kinds of choices between life and death God keeps putting before us, even as God keeps urging us, in our freedom, to choose life. We learned last week about the matrix of mercy in which God cradles us all even while allowing us complete freedom of mind and heart.

³ Not sure where he wrote this – I got it from a Columbia Seminary publication, roughly 2008-9.

We've talked a lot about how God is forever opening the way God wants us to walk; today we're going to talk about when God closes the way. "When way closes," is a polite Quakerly way of saying when things don't work out. When we hit a wall. When all the signs point to "go," but the light never turns green. When whatever we are absolutely sure is what we're meant to be doing suddenly doesn't progress. That's "way closing." And it's a pisser.

In his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer casts a hairy eyeball over his own life and notes the many doors God unceremoniously slammed in his face (and not with some obligatory window opening, either) and cautions, "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent."

Certainly the psalmist in today's text is eager and committed to doing the "right thing." "Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end." "Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart." "Lead me in the path of your commandments, O God, for I delight in it. Turn my heart to your decrees, turn my eyes from looking at vanities, turn away the disgrace I dread," because I really, really, *really* want to be a "do right, all night" man.

Sounds like Parker Palmer when he signed up for a season at Pendle Hill, a spiritual community in Pennsylvania focused on prayer, study, and a vision of human possibility. Palmer was there, ready and eager, to discern God's will for his next steps. Directly he plunged into a daily routine of quiet, thoughtful prayer. "Have faith and 'way' will open," counsel the Quakers.

Only, the thing is, months passed and "way" wasn't opening.

Frustrated, he consulted an old Quaker woman. “Ruth,” he said, “the only way that’s opened so far is the *wrong* way. I sit in silence, I pray, I listen for my calling, but way is not opening. I still haven’t the foggiest idea of what I’m meant to do. Way may open for other people, but it’s sure not opening to me!”

Replied Ruth somberly, “I’m a birthright Friend, and in sixty plus years of living, way has *never* opened in front of me.” She paused a moment. Then she grinned. “But a lot of way has closed behind me, and that has the same guiding effect.”

“Palmer laughed loud and long with Ruth, the kind of laughter that comes when a simple truth exposes your heart for the needlessly neurotic mess it has become.”⁴

But what Ruth said was funny only because it was true. Way closing before and behind us, if we’re willing to see through the eyes of faith, really *does* have the same guiding effect. At least for those of us who are willing to take “no” for an answer.

But Palmer who had been raised like many of us, on the notion that he could do anything if only he worked hard enough. The sky’s the limit for what Palmer could attain, his parents taught him, given a little energy and commitment and elbow grease. Not an uncommon teaching in this “can do” culture. Certainly I was raised to believe that I could reach any goal I set to achieve, weren’t you? Something gets in the way, inside or out, you just try harder and *you can do it!*

But what Parker discovered is that that ain’t necessarily so. The thing is, he learned, “each of us arrives here with a particular nature, which means both potential and limits.”⁵

Hate limits, don’t you? What a buzz kill. What an inconvenience. What an obstacle to overcome.

⁴ pp. 38-39.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 42

Palmer tells the story of, after years of “golden boy” status throughout his student career, getting fired from his research assistantship at Berkeley. Stunned, appalled, outraged at the absurdity of this clearly unfair turn of events, it was actually years before Palmer could see his own part in the event, never mind the wisdom or grace of it.

“It would be nice,” he notes, “if our limits did not reveal themselves in such embarrassing ways as getting fired from a job, or failing in certain relationships, or getting stuck in the middle of what we are absolutely certain is the right path for us.” But what Palmer tries to teach is that we can learn as much about our nature by running into our limits as by experiencing our potentials. In other words, “grim determination” ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. There may even be a considerable price to pay for stubbornly aligning oneself with some externally imposed goals that has little or nothing to do with the nature and gifts (and limitations) God gave us.

“Despite the American myth,” says Palmer, “you and I cannot be or do whatever we desire”. Our created natures limit us. There’s no escaping that we, like all organisms, thrive in some roles and relationship and conditions, while in others, we flat wither and die.⁶

Who of us doesn’t admire rugged determination? But “when we consistently refuse to take ‘no’ for an answer, we can miss vital clues to our identity. Way closing also has the guiding effect of aligning us with the truth of our God-given nature, especially when,” Palmer suggests, “the life one is living runs crosswise to the grain of one’s soul.”⁷

One of the ways we in the church live lives running crosswise to the grain of our soul is when we give something that, in reality, we do not possess. Giving something

⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

⁷ Ibid., p. 41.

we do not actually possess can look like love, even sacrificial love, but may, in fact, be a violation of our nature in the name of nobility. It's an occupational hazard for pastors, and, I say, for a lot of people in the church. And we're all know what happens when we violate our natures in the name of nobility, don't we? Burnout. Anybody here *unfamiliar* with burnout?

I am reminded of a Thomas Merton quote Deedra sent me during the torturous months of her discernment about whether or not to continue serving here at Emory Church. Merton says:

"To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender oneself to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation in violence. It destroys one's own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of one's own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom that makes the work fruitful."

Palmer says, when we give what we do not possess, our light quite literally "burns out." *But when what we give of ourselves is integral to our nature, it renews itself, and us, even as we give it away.*

Perhaps this is a curious lesson for a sermon based on a psalmist who clearly wants nothing more than to turn his heart to God's decrees. But Ps 119 is a Torah psalm, a didactic psalm, that aims at teaching about the ways of God and of humanity in the world. In the didactic psalms, humanity is called to responsible participation in God's world.⁸ And what I hear Palmer saying is that we participate responsibly in God's world only to whatever extent that we are able to live authentically out of our God-given created nature.

⁸ "Psalms," William P. Brown, *Theological Biblical Commentary*, ed. by Gail R. O'Day and David Petersen, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky. 2009. pp. 184-185.

“You *shall* be true to yourself! You *shall* accept the humanity entrusted to you!”
Saying “yes” to the self God has given each of us is “*the categorical imperative*” of the Christian faith.

Perhaps this is what 20th century British writer John Middleton Murry means in an essay about the Parables of Jesus when he writes, “it is better to be whole than to be good.” It is better to be whole than to be good. Do you hear something freeing in that? Isn’t “wholeness” what salvation aims at? Not “goodness,” which we know we cannot achieve, but “wholeness?”

“If we are to live our lives fully and well,” says Parker, “we must take the “no” of the way that closes and find the guidance it has to offer – and take the “yes” of the way that opens and respond with the “yes” of our lives.”⁹

So may each of us cast a hairy eyeball over the complexities and ambiguities of our own lives, reflecting on the ways God has opened and the ways God has closed, in order to ask ourselves whether the life we are leading is the life that wants to live in us. For one dwells with God by being faithful to one’s nature. One crosses God by trying to be something one is not. And it is better to be whole than to be good.

To the glory of God. Amen.

⁹ Ibid., p.55.