

AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD: A GEOGRAPHY OF FAITH
The Practice of Feeling Pain: Breakthrough

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

John 11: 32-44

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

So the Jews said, 'See how [Jesus] loved [Lazarus]. But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

John 11:37

All Saints Day is a day to remember and to give thanks for those "saints" who have gone before us. It is also a good opportunity to ponder what it means to be a living, breathing "saint." It's a day to explore, as Mary Oliver asked: "what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" (Mary Oliver, *The Summer Day*)

This past Thursday Ruth Hopkins and I went to Starbucks to do a little worship planning and creative thinking. There is nothing like a venti *Awake Tea*, double cupped, to get the creative juices flowing! Because this All Saints Day service was one of the items on our agenda, she brought along a book called *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time*. It is a book that tells the story of a "saint" every day of the calendar year.

Ruth noted that the "saint" for Thursday, October 29, was Clarence Jordan. She didn't know who he was, but I did, because I grew up Baptist. Clarence Jordan was a Southern Baptist. He was a salty saint...one of those radical, God-intoxicated followers of Jesus.

Jordan earned a PhD from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1938 in Greek New Testament. He advocated for full equality and inclusion in an age of deep and painful racial division. He also cofounded a communal settlement in Georgia named Koinonia Farm that incorporated these ideals of racial inclusion and equality into its unique vision of community, right down the road from where Jimmy Carter grew up in Plains. His devotion to social justice inspired Habitat for Humanity founder Millard Fuller to begin his global housing project.

Jordan is also famous for his *Cotton Patch* translations of the Christian Scriptures. He liked to read and translate from his well-worn Greek New Testament. He was commonly dressed in

overalls, his hands worn and soiled from work in the fields. He was a preacher who had the power to inspire and disturb that was rooted in his radical witness to a Jesus that is still embodied in flesh and blood (Incarnation) and to his simple conviction that the values of God's reign are meant to be lived out in the here and now. He died in his writing shack on October 29, 1969 at the age of 57, with an unfinished *Cotton Patch* version of the Gospel of John before him.

When I was a student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, we even had a *Clarence Jordan Center for Christian Ethical Concerns*. However, that center has been closed since the fundamentalists took over the seminary in 1993. We who alums of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary have to explain ourselves. We either went to Southern before or after "the fall," that is, when the seminary fell into the hands of the fundamentalists. Anyway, the closing of the *Clarence Jordan Center for Christian Ethical Concerns* should give you a clue as to just how radical he was and how unacceptable his vision is to current day fundamentalists more concerned with doctrinal purity and political power rather than Jesus' way of Love.

In the *All Saints* book, it said that

Jordan believed that the problem with Christianity today stemmed from the fact that most Christians preferred to picture Jesus enthroned in heaven or safely confined to distant "Bible times." Thus they missed the radical and disturbing challenge of the Incarnation. It was important to realize that "the resurrection places Jesus on this side of the grave, here and now, in the midst of life. The Good News of the resurrection is not that we shall die and go home with him but that he is risen and comes home with us, bringing all his hungry, naked, thirsty, sick, prisoner brothers with him."

Along with Clarence Jordan, I believe Jesus was a person who was not afraid to live...to be fully alive on earth...even amidst life's greatest pains and human sufferings, whether that of others or his own. And Jesus, both then and now, is fully alive and present in the midst of pain and suffering.

Our gospel text today reminds us that resurrection power and hope is not something restricted to Jesus' life and unique only to him, nor is it restricted to life after death. Resurrection power and hope was at work well before Jesus' resurrection was experienced by his early followers after his crucifixion, and continues to be at work among us, who continue to follow Jesus, wherever we are dead *now*, and wherever there are tears *now*.

I do not preach much about heaven. I preach nothing about hell, unless it is about some experience of hell I, or others, have experienced here on earth. And I take my clue from Jesus, who taught repeatedly that we are supposed to concentrate on living here and now and trust God with what is to come beyond the grave. And to tell the truth, the Bible doesn't give us a lot of specifics about what lies beyond the grave. We have the imagination of a few biblical writers, but these are by no means scientific -- "been there done that, bought the mug and t-shirt" descriptions -- of heaven. They are not photos that you could post on Facebook or reality videos you could upload or watch on YouTube. They are poetic and imaginative visions, designed to evoke our hope and trust in God who is with always.

In the gospel text today, we read the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept." What made Jesus weep? Lazarus, his friend, had died. Some suggested that the tears came from Jesus' love for Lazarus. Others blamed Jesus for Lazarus' death: '*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?*' Maybe he was touched by the grief of his other friends, Mary and Martha, over the loss of their brother. Maybe he did feel guilty for not getting there sooner. Maybe he just felt sadness over the general human condition and its deep pain and grief. The phrase translated "greatly disturbed in spirit" can also be translated "indignant." Maybe Jesus was frustrated by their lack of trust. Maybe it was all those things. Whatever was, Jesus wept. Jesus was moved to tears. And yet, even amidst his own tears, Jesus stepped toward the tomb, not away from it; he moved toward the pain, he didn't avoid it. He prayed and shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" And when Lazarus came out of the tomb, Jesus told the others,

“Unbind him, and let him go.”

When I read this story, I can't help but wonder, what tombs I need to walk out of, what bindings I need to let Jesus free me from, what pain or suffering or grief I need a break from. Jesus will not let death or suffering or pain or heartache have the last word. I think that is what John wants us to know when he tells us this story of Jesus and Lazarus.

Now, I do not know what it looks like when it happens. I do not what mysterious processes are at work. I do not what form it will take. However, I do trust that God is with us always and that death and pain will not have the last word. I do trust that God is present through all of our pain and grief and suffering, pointing us, calling us, luring us to the way of life and a deep peace.

And because I trust that God is with us and for us NOW, I have no problem trusting that God will be with us and for us THEN, in life beyond the grave. And since I trust that there is life beyond this life, then those who have gone before us are with God too. And if they are with God, then we are with them as God is with us -- all of us together in what the church calls “the communion of the saints.”

This “communion of the saints” reminds us that we, and those who have gone before us, are part of something larger, a grand cycle of life and love in God, where endings bear new beginnings; where pain and loss of all kinds spring forth new life. And what a better time of year than the season of autumn to remind us of all this. Mark Murphy captures this idea beautifully in his poem:

*Maples and aspens know -
they boast a dying yellow and flame a glorious orange
they flaunt their final color
when morning sun enlivens and setting sun glistens
off their brittle leaves
then the air chills and breezes whisper gently “come”
and down they shed til softly matted is the forest and the road
the ground is then assembled
with yellow hearts and orange red and golden leaves
with brown and green from grass and weeds and crackles under foot
the end comes with winter rains
which mat and soak and finally wash away
the aspens and the maples found going not so hard in all this glory---
but then aspens and maples believe in spring*

In our gospel today, Jesus' tears are leading us to a resurrection hope, to a deep connection with human pain and suffering, from which the Spring will come; to a faith in God that knows deep in our heart of hearts that out of the midst of great pain and struggle a breakthrough...a resurrection ...a spring...is not only possible, but inevitable.

So pain and suffering is not something we ignore, deny, or wish away. Often it is something we cannot fix. It is not God's punishment or a sign of God's absence. And the practice of feeling pain is not some sadistic exercise meant to make us wallow in sin, shame or guilt.

However, this practice of feeling pain is something we do to pay attention and let the practice teach us what we need to know about being human...what we need to know about God's presence and care.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote:

There will always be people who run from every kind of pain and suffering, just as there will always be religions that promise to put them to sleep. For those willing to stay awake, pain remains a reliable altar in the world, a place to discover that a life can be as full of meaning as it is of hurt. The two have never canceled each other out and I doubt

they ever will, at least not until each of us – or all of us together – find the way through.

She is so right on. Sister is ON! So much of religion is as good as any drug I know, seeking to take us out of this world, seeking to offer us a heaven to come in the sweet bye and bye to anesthetize the pain in the here and now. And if that is our hope, then all we are left to do is to avoid the pain or to ignore it with all the patience we can muster in hopes of a better day that is yet to be in heaven. Or, we pray for God to remove the pain and heal the suffering, with our focus on the removal part. And when we do that, despair is not too far behind because we feel ignored by God.

If we are forced to wait for God's presence and blessings in the life to come; if we are obsessed with God being found only in the removing of the pain then all we are left with is a skewed sense of God's presence, and we tend to ignore God's closeness in the face of our brother and sister saints and in beauty all around us. What Barbara Brown Taylor is talking about in her book and what Jesus is modeling in our gospel today -- even in the face of those who would say '*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?*' – what Barbara and Jesus are talking about is the practice of feeling pain...feeling the kind of pain that causes tears, until you, with God by your side, find a way through it. In the end it is about being real, authentic; staying alive and open to Life and Love and to the sacred journey with God.

There is a passage in *The Velveteen Rabbit* that reminds me of what it means to be alive and real.

"What is real?" Asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery, before Nana came to tidy the room.

"Real isn't how you're made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When somebody loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become real."

"Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up, or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

Sainthood does not mean you have to do some heroic thing, it means simply becoming alive to hope, attune to love, aware of God's presence, even as it hurts. It means keeping faith in a time when cynicism, anger, fear, doubt, pain and suffering threaten to overtake the human psyche. It means investing in love when everyone else is worried about the stock market. It means being real with yourself and others instead of hiding behind masks and empty rhetoric. It means trusting that pain and suffering can teach us the deeper things about life and about God if we will pay attention to it and let it lead us deeper into the human experience. In a time when so many things threaten our sense of security and safety and self, it means continuing to invest in the life of the spirit and the spirit in community.

For all the saints, both living and dead, for those we remember today and miss, for those of us who are living today with pains and sufferings of all kinds, let us be fully alive in God. Amen.