

September 27, 2009

Rev. Dr. Steven H. Koski

“The Jesus Prescription for Healthy Living: A Healthy
Spirituality”

Exodus 15.22-25; 16.2-4; 32.1-6

Luke 23.44-46

In a word or two, how would you define a healthy spirituality?
I wonder if Jesus would use the words SURRENDER and TRUST.
In the very midst of unspeakable pain and anguish on the cross,
Jesus prays those amazing words, “Father, into YOUR hands, I
commend my spirit.” Surrender and trust.

Think for a moment... in a word or two, what words would you use
to describe a healthy spirituality? To describe your spirituality?
Obviously, there are many answers to that question.

A word I wish to invite you to contemplate today is
ACCEPTANCE. God grant me the serenity to accept the things I
cannot change, courage to change the things I can and the wisdom
to know the difference. ACCEPTANCE.

Acceptance is very different than resignation or giving up.
Acceptance is the capacity to embrace all of life and each day as a
gift from God...even in the most difficult circumstances.

I wonder if one aspect of a healthy spirituality involves learning to
embrace and love “what is” rather than continuing to insist life be
the way you hoped or the way you think it should be...and learning
to discover and open yourself to God’s presence in each and every
moment.

Virginia Satir, a family therapist, wrote, “Life is rarely the way it is
supposed to be. Life isn’t necessarily fair. Life just is. It is how
you choose to respond to life and the spirit you bring to life that
makes all the difference. The sooner we accept that reality and

realize life is lived moment by moment, the better chance we have of living a deep, meaningful, rich life, in spite of life's unfairness."

Richard Carlson, author of *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* wrote, "I used to think my life was going to begin once the debt was paid, the conflict resolved, the problems overcome, the pain diminished until I woke up one day and realized THIS IS MY LIFE."

THIS IS MY LIFE...perhaps not the life I hoped for or dreamed...perhaps not the former life I wished I had back...THIS is my life...and it is a gift from God...and we live every moment of every day in the heart of God's presence.

In today's Bible reading, for generations the Hebrew slaves had undoubtedly dreamt of liberation, of being free from oppression, of being able to make their own decisions and shape their own lives. But, as they wandered in the wilderness, they were filled with discouragement.

As a free people, life was not as they imagined it would be. Have you ever been there? They felt they would have been better off staying in slavery where at least they had enough to eat and drink. There was a lot of anger and resentment and fear.

Wilderness is that place on our journeys where life isn't what we imagined it would be. This message today comes from my awareness that we all experience our own wilderness at one time or another. I know many if not most of you are in some kind of wilderness.

We anticipate how we think life will be for us, AND THEN LIFE HAPPENS...life moves in unexpected directions and we often find ourselves filled with anger, fear, confusion, resentment, perhaps even bitterness.

Wilderness happens. The wilderness of this economic crisis has profoundly impacted our lives and we still have no idea what's ahead.

There's the wilderness of crushing grief...the wilderness of serious illness...the wilderness of extended and difficult treatment...the wilderness of broken relationships and broken families and broken dreams.

Wilderness happens. Life isn't fair. Life is rarely the way we think it's supposed to be. Life just is.

What is your wilderness? Reflect for a moment about the spirit in which you are living in that wilderness. How might you live with greater faith, courage, hope and love in that wilderness?

Today, I want to offer a wilderness story that I hope might speak to your own story in some way. The story is about Alix Shulman who has written 12 books of fiction and biography. The title of her newly published memoir caught my attention; TO LOVE WHAT IS.

It talks about a sudden and radical change in her life. She described her marriage to her husband Scott, an artist and sculptor as wonderfully interdependent. They gave each other their freedom and independence to pursue their own dreams, yet loved the life they shared together.

Everything changed on July 22, 2004. Wilderness happens. They were staying in a beach house on a small Maine island when Scott somehow fell from the sleeping loft to the floor; nine feet below.

Scott suffered many broken bones, internal bleeding and multiple blood clots in the brain.

Alix learned that human bones normally heal in about six weeks but for brains the course of healing is unpredictable and erratic. The doctors said it could be a year before they could determine the extent of the brain damage. She wrote, “A YEAR! I reeled in shock but never wavered in my resolve.”

For nearly three months of hospitalization – six weeks in the ICU followed by time in a rehab hospital, she sat beside Scott 12 hours each day, determined to protect him from daily institutional mishaps, soothing his terrors, waiting out his delusions. She was absolutely committed to restoring her husband’s health.

Scott’s body began to heal but he had no short term memory and his cognitive abilities were severely compromised. He couldn’t figure out how to work the phone, bring up the names of neighbors, make sense of a menu, much less make art again. He couldn’t tell you what century, year, season, month or day it is. But he did recognize family and friends and seemed to register conversations.

Alix wrote, “Buoyed by each improvement, however miniscule, I embraced Scott’s recovery as my calling. My life had only one goal – to restore his life and our life to the way it was. Unwilling to trust any one else, I leaped into action, determined to keep him active and involved.

But...by the first anniversary of his fall, I reluctantly had to admit and accept that he was deeply and permanently disabled. While physically he was much better, walking and talking almost normally again, his capacity to think or remember was devastatingly damaged.

He couldn’t initiate an activity on his own or make a decision; all the crucial functions of the frontal cortex – organizing and executing a plan...problem-solving...reasoning...all those higher

cognitive functions that are the glory of our species as well as the gatekeeper functions of judgment and inhibition – all were now beyond his reach. And he had no memory of his accident and no understanding of the dramatic change he had undergone.”

Alix wrote, “As it gradually came home to me that he might never recover, I sometimes felt myself slipping toward despair...I knew something had to change. I knew I had to accept life was no longer the way it used to be.”

She said, “I knew I needed to find a way to embrace and, as strange as this sounds, ‘love what is’ – somehow I needed to find a way to accept not just the pleasant parts of my life but to embrace all of my life...to stop waiting for life to be different...to accept life is now with its joy and its sorrow.”

She said, “I had to accept, adapt, bend to this new reality...”

Beginning in the second post-fall year, after surrendering and accepting at last the truth of Scott’s permanent disability and coming to terms with my own sometimes debilitating anguish, I realized life wasn’t the way I thought it was supposed to be or hoped it would be but that didn’t mean life wasn’t good...a gift to be embraced each day.”

That’s what those freed Hebrew slaves in our Bible reading found so difficult to do; their liberation was not what they hoped it would be and they were bitter and resentful. But life in the wilderness was what it was...part of their journey...and God was there in the midst of it giving them just what they need.

Alix Shulman said to embrace life fully means to accept life with all of its inevitable limitations. Adapt to it...struggle with it...love it! Find a way to love ‘what is’ and trust that even though life may

not be fair it can still be good...God is present and will give us just what we need.

Alix says she now has found ways to carve out time for herself each day and values the rest of the time she spends with Scott – at home, taking him to concerts or other events.

She said he forgets the movie or concert the minute it is over – but still enjoys the experience. He simply can do no other than live in the moment, in the present. She said I have learned so much from him about living in the “now” – and God it would seem is always present in the “now.” (“Love What Is” by Alix Kates Shulman)

Kathleen Norris offers a prayer for living in the wilderness. It’s on the screen and I suggest we pray it together as we embrace and accept our own lives in the wilderness. You will be able to find a copy of this prayer if you like on my blog on the church’s website tomorrow.

Please join me:

This is another day, O Lord.

I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord,
For whatever it may be.

If I am to stand up, help me stand bravely.

If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly.

If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently.

And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly.

(“Acedia and Me” by Kathleen Norris)

Wilderness happens. God is present in our wilderness. That’s the promise. You are not alone. There is a light that shines deep within that no amount of darkness can extinguish.

There is a love stronger than even death itself.

May that light and love enfold you and uphold you as you embrace life and the gift of each moment.