

May 2, 2010

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Spiritual Literacy

“The Qualities of a Spiritual Life: Awareness”

Mark 10.17-27

The Bible reading this morning needs a little set-up and explanation.

We hear about a rich man who came to Jesus asking how he can get eternal life.

Now, there are a lot of ways to interpret eternal life. Many scholars suggest the man is asking more about the quality of his life NOW, in this moment, than he is inquiring about what will happen when he dies. He wants to know how he might get into a right relationship with God. Eternity means a quality of life, a depth of life, as much as it means a forever life. It is a word that describes the present moment that is so rich that time stands still – you experience eternity in the moment.

It is clear that something is missing in this man’s life. In fact, our reading says he came to Jesus and fell on his knees. This was a common approach in that day of some one who is seeking healing. The reading suggests the man, perhaps, has everything a person could want according to the world’s standards but he knows something is missing.

Often the first step toward experiencing Grace is acknowledging our need for God’s Grace.

So, the man asks about eternal life, and Jesus asks him if he has observed the 10 commandments, which the rich man says he has.

The reading then says Jesus looks him hard in the eye – you know that look that is able to see all there is to see about a person – nothing is hidden – and it says that Jesus loved him. It doesn't say Jesus said, "Do the right things and believe the right things first and I will love you." It says Jesus saw the man for who he was and he loved him. The gift of unconditional love was there for the man to receive.

And Jesus said, "There's one thing left: Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor. All your wealth will be heavenly wealth. And come follow me."

The man's face clouded over. This was the last thing he expected to hear, or maybe wanted to hear, and he walked off with a heavy heart.

The rich man in this story was holding on tight to a lot of things and he was not about to let go and Jesus knew it. Looking at his disciples, Jesus said, "Do you have any idea how difficult it is for people who 'have it all' to enter God's Kingdom?"

Again, there are different points of view about what Jesus is telling the man he has to do. Some take it literally and understand it as the need for him to give away all of his possessions, and that's one way to read this story.

However, I think this story is trying to tell us something different. Jesus had a way of saying fairly outrageous things to get people's attention. I think Jesus is pointing out to the man that his attachment to his wealth is actually in the way of a deeper and more meaningful life...a life that is enriched by a vibrant relationship and connection with God. He is holding so tightly to his wealth that his hands and heart are not open to receive the

gifts of God's Grace and God's presence. He is so focused on his riches that he is unable to see the riches around him...the riches of a life centered in God and not in himself.

I really think Jesus is talking to all of us, whether we're wealthy or not. He's asking us, "What are those things in our life that keep us from God...what gets in the way of connecting more closely with God...deepening our sense of union and intimacy with God?"

Sure, it may be money for some, but it could be any number of things...it could be busyness...it could be holding onto anger or resentment...it could be fear...it could be outdated beliefs about God that center on God's judgment instead of God's Grace.

Our story today says that the unconditional love of Jesus and the invitation to a new life was right there in front of the man but he was holding so tightly to his possessions he couldn't see it or receive it.

What is keeping you from God...from experiencing God's Grace...from receiving God's gifts...from recognizing God's presence in all things and all people?

This new sermon series I'm starting today is about practicing the presence of God...cultivating a deeper sense of connection and intimacy with God and greater awareness of God's presence. Faith, in many ways is learning to look at life with a new set of eyes and seeing the world and the people around us in different ways.

There's a beautiful story of Mother Theresa who had a knack of recognizing God's presence even in the most horrific places. You wonder whether she was able to hold God in her heart the way

she did because she emptied her heart and hands of everything else.

One day she made friends with a man who was dying on the streets. He had maggots eating at his open wounds. Mother Theresa brought him to the convent to clean him up.

The whole time the man complained and cursed her. One of the younger nuns asked her how she could stand to clean him when he was being so nasty. Mother Theresa said, "Oh that was just Jesus having a bad day."

Mother Theresa saw God...everywhere...in all people, especially in those who were having a bad day.

What keeps you from seeing and experiencing God like that? I often think of spirituality as developing the capacity to see your life and all of life with different eyes . . . eyes able to see beyond the surface of things and able to recognize God's presence. Have you ever used night vision goggles that let you see in the dark? I was once in the Outback in Australia doing Leadership training for the US Air Force that had a base in the Outback, a placed called Woomera.

It was the middle of the night and we were looking at the stars with night vision goggles. Night vision goggles work by gathering and magnifying all available light. Which meant that even the dimmest stars normally invisible to the human eye can be easily seen through night vision goggles.

Imagine being out in the country and looking at stars on an ordinary night and multiply that number of stars millions of times and that's what the sky looks like through night vision goggles. It

is staggering and left me speechless. A sense of awe is usually at the heart of a spiritual experience. Words can't come close to capturing what I experienced.

I realized I was seeing only a tiny sliver of one galaxy in a universe of perhaps 100 billion galaxies, and that some of the galaxies contain in excess of one trillion stars.

And here's the thing. All that beauty and majesty, has been over my head all this time, and I had no idea.

It took a new method of seeing that hadn't been available to me. It made me wonder what else I've been missing. What else is right in front of me where maybe I've not been equipped to see, haven't had the tools to see, maybe haven't had the sensitivity to see, or maybe I've been too busy to notice, or so focused on me and my riches or my desire for riches that I fail to recognize the riches of heaven that surround me every minute?

What else have I been missing? What have you been missing? When we are so focused and consumed with ourselves, we can miss the gifts that are right in front of us. Some might call that our ego – and one way to understand the word ego is that it's "edging God out."

In her book, *First Light*, author Sue Monk-Kidd shares a story that is one of her earliest memories.

She said that she was four years-old and asleep in her room when a sound woke her up.

It was, she said, a persistent sound of scratching on the window screen, and it was a rather ominous sound.

However, she wasn't afraid, only curious about the magical nature of the sound. With all kinds of possibilities dancing in her head, she crawled out of bed and went to her parents' room, waking her mother. 'Mama,' she said, "There's an angel scratching outside my window."

I can only imagine how I might have responded, "Oh, that's just the wind. Go back to bed." Or, "Don't be silly; there's no such thing."

Sue's mother didn't do either of those. Instead, she seemed to understand that the ability to listen creatively to the world and to hear the humdrum and the familiar as sacred possibilities was a tender, fragile thing.

Sue Monk-Kidd writes, "So rather than douse my first foray into holy imaginings, my mother put her blessing on it. She said, 'An angel? Wonderful; say hello for me.'"

What a gift her mother gave her! And it's the gift God is offering us.

Can we hear the scratching on the window screen and hear God's voice? Can we watch the trees blossoming and see God? Can we hear a child's laughter and smile at the face of God? Can we recognize the face of Jesus in others even when Jesus is having a bad day? Can we hear the cries of those who suffer and see the tears of children as an invitation to life...a life greater than ourselves?

I've often said that having faith is like looking at life through a new set of eyes. We see one another differently and we see the world around us in entirely new ways.

As we open our hands and hearts to receive the gift of God's grace...the gift of God's presence, we learn to see God everywhere we look – in every person we meet, in every song we sing, in every inch of creation, in every experience, however significant or insignificant.

Each week during this sermon series, I'm going to invite us to practice the presence of God during the week. In your bulletin, you will find a daily prayer to use: Open the eyes of my heart, lord, help me to see you in all things and all people today. You will find a daily practice : as you go about your everyday routines and activities, pay attention and notice something you haven't seen before.

And, you will find some ponderings, some questions to continue to explore as it is our questions that invite us into a deeper spiritual life: What keeps you from experiencing God's presence? What are you holding so tightly where that you are edging God out? What might help you draw closer to God this week?

Today, you are invited to this table. As we receive these ordinary gifts of bread and cup, may we taste and know God's profound love for us and may we go from this table able to recognize God's presence that Graces our everyday lives.