

## THE FACE OF THE FUTURE

Texts on Sunday, February 5, 2012

*Mark 1: 29-39; Philippians 4: 1-9*

**B**eloved, beloved, beloved. Those are the words and that is the feeling tone of Paul's whole letter to the church in Philippi. Life together was working there. ♪ You could tell they were Christians by their love. Now, I believe that every human everywhere longs for community like that. Just last week, I saw again last year's television advertisement announcing the day of dedication for the MLK memorial. People are coming to a table set for dinner outdoors. The camera pulls away. The table is big, very big. As the eye takes in more of the open county, the beautifully prepared table stretches out and out, and more and more people are coming, greeting strangers as they sit. They are of all colors, shapes, abilities. How shall we put it? They are coming from east and west, from north and south, to sit at table in the kingdom of God. I believe that in every man, woman, and child there lies the longing for community like that—so beloved and so loving that we will be free at last and able to thank God almighty that we are free at last. And of course, that yearning to be—to become—a beloved community lies in you, O Riverside. It is in bud, ready to burst into bloom, to mature as fruit and food for all. I believe it. Do you believe it?

Now listen: It is time to begin to talk about the future of The Riverside Church. I'm not going to go all the way there with you. Although there is a lot of work still before us, nevertheless, mine is for the interim. It's all right to talk about this. There will be a shift now in our conversation, from last year to this. We have a work of profound significance to learn to do together, something the apostle Paul was always doing with his churches: learning deep and deeper that you can run hard with love fully knowing that some whom you love will leave; that you yourself must part one day; that "there is a place in your soul that neither time, nor space, nor no created thing can touch" (M. Eckhart); that there is a part of you you do not need to put behind a hard shell—a part of you that is not wounded and cannot be harmed; a part of you that can love, no matter what happens.

When enough of you live and love from that place of courage, then the church is able to see the face of the future here. This is the key in a successful interim ministry. It is not unlike marriage therapy. When enough of you is daily able and willing to call to mind the deep reason for your coming together—when, in Paul's phrase, you are of "the same mind in the Lord"—then you are ready to face the future. So what gets in the way of love like that, O beloved community?

Let's call it the fever. Simon Peter's mother-in-law had a fever. Fever is a lot of heat in the head, and no light. You can't think. You've got to lie down. You can't serve. You've got the fever. It's all about you: How disappointed you are, how disregarded, disrespected, disaffected, disgusted. As for them, they are dysfunctional, disorganized, distant, discussed, disproportionately . . . you name it. How are we going to get over "dis" fever?

Shall we turn to Jesus? "He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." Cool. And when it comes to fever, cool is good. But let's be honest, a healing miracle in a Bible story seems not much help, for we really don't expect a supernatural hero or a supernatural healing to cool "dis-" fever. So let's get clear about the cause of our fever, and about the motive of love in community.

The fever of self-concern; what keeps too many of us bed-bound, unable to abound in love; the force that springs loose in gossip, rolled eyes, bureaucratic over-control, constant worry about money, mission, membership, ministers, music—that fever is fear. Now, fear is not all bad. God knows, we're wired for it, like all the animals, and it's there to keep us safe from harm. But what is harm? What in you is really liable to destruction? Really? Is it whatever you say it is? Are you really so small, that you define your self—you limit yourself—to the size of that shell of you that feels pinched or afraid to lose this security, that pleasure, this power, that protection? Why on earth does God give us humans full knowledge of life and death, except that God yearns for us to learn death so that we may know life not like the animals, ever-wired with ears pricked and hair raised in caution, but life absolute. This is the end of the fever: You cannot be harmed. You have life without end but in God. Do you believe it?

Here is the diagnosis from a great doctor of the soul: "Where there is a mature relationship between people, there is always compassion and forgiveness." (Thich Nat Hanh) If you do not love freely; if you are much worried and distracted by many things; if you have the fever—and who does not?—then to that degree, you do not yet believe the promise of the gospel. You are what Jacob Needleman calls "an intermediate Christian." You are not mature in Christ, for the full promise is still a ways off. Is this bad? No. When was it bad to trust that a promise can yet be fulfilled. What is bad is when Christians deny that they are not yet mature in Christ, and assume that God's work in them is done. Do you take offense? That is the fever.

So how can we proceed? Do we just lie abed with *dis* fever, waiting for the big man to come raise us by the hand—whether that's Jesus, or the perfect pastor? I don't think so. Consider a strange little secret with me.

You've may have noticed in many gospel readings that, as Jesus goes about healing people, nobody knows who he is in relation to God except the

demons he casts out—and Jesus won't let them say what they know. Bible scholars call this gospel story of Jesus' hidden divine nature, visible only to those in the spirit, *the messianic secret*. People in the flesh don't get him. After all, there aren't any clues. No standard photo, no halo. If you or I walked the Galilee shore a long time ago, would we have known him?

People are wired to pay attention to their own neediness, so of course they are happy for Jesus' healing touch. But there is nothing in our wired nature—our fever—that can help us see Jesus; that can help us imitate him; that can help us love like him. In the flesh, we just cannot get over our fever. We are unaware that life absolute is already coursing through us. That eternal life is now. In Mark's gospel, as Jesus' mentors his disciples, he says to them ever more sharply—You do not know who I am, and you cannot know—until after my death, and I rise. In other words, the power to know God in Christ, the strength to love “even as I have loved you” comes to those who learn death from the Master. That's the end of the fever.

Are Christians, since Easter, all cured of the fever? Have they all learned death from the Master, since they have that greatest story ever told to tell? You will know if they are cured by their love! Listen to this story.

When Martin Luther King died, I was living with my husband, a white Jewish civil rights lawyer, in one of the most repressive places on the face of the earth: the state of Mississippi . . . I was pregnant when the news of his assassination reached us. It had been his voice that urged both of us, at separate times, to return to the South; to challenge the apartheid of Mississippi. If not for his voice, pointing out a duty it might have been safer to ignore, we might not have found each other, not to mention a large part of our life's work. Determined to follow Martin to the end, we traveled to Atlanta. We walked behind his mule drawn coffin for many miles. I lost the child.

We remained in Mississippi for several years after King's death, yet for me the period following his passing represented a time of unspeakable sorrow. Only in the South, I still believe, was he mourned as deeply as he deserved. Because as Southern-born people of color, we understood what a gift his life had offered us. His shining fearlessness. Only in the South did so many of us retreat into so profound a sorrow as to appear to have been struck dumb . . .

And yet, there was a miracle, too. Again, especially among black Southerners. Even in our deepest sorrow . . . we discovered a tender, radiant certainty that made some wretched, bewildered . . . part of us begin, almost, to smile. We knew, never not to know, that he had died for us. We knew we had been seen, held precious and dear beyond pain or price. We knew we had been completely loved. I firmly believe that there is no wholeness for a people, no promised land in view, until this happens. A challenging thought.

Alice Walker is describing the process which, a moment ago, I called learning death at the level which can teach life. I am not at all persuaded that Christians simply learn death from having and telling the story of Christ's passion and resurrection. Walker takes the doubt all the way down: no beloved community, no face on the future, no promised land can come into

view until a community knows they have “been seen, held precious and dear beyond pain or price—[until they know they have] been completely loved.”

When the spirits see who Jesus is and he will not let them speak; when he orders disciples to tell no one what they feel they are coming to understand; the message is, You cannot know God’s will for you until, by learning death, you are free and know you are completely loved. Then the fever goes.

So how does the transformation work? Alas, this fact is plainly engraved in the tragedies of the church’s history: the transformation of divine love does not overflow in Christians just because we say he is risen. Were it so, then justice would flow out from the churches like a mighty river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Instead, the people struggle hard to love any but their own kind, whatever kind they choose.

The strength to love comes hard, hard as death. Indeed, the relationship is not just similar. The deep secret of transformation in Christ is that love comes as a death. After all the easy talk about love is done, when love was easy because someone loved me, or I them; when the Hallmark rhymes are spent and the schmaltzy music of love recedes; when the difficulty of love is confessed, and our stage of intermediate Christian faith comes clear to us; then we can feel, with Alice Walker, that a death can actually work in us. Death is waiting to work in us, to swing low, to carry us over beyond the dividing walls of our fear, to take us home, free of the fever, ready to serve.

Here is how Thich Nat Hanh put it to young Vietnamese being maimed and killed by America’s war on their land almost fifty years ago.

Promise me  
Promise me this day,  
Promise me now,  
While the sun is overhead  
Exactly at the zenith,  
Promise me.  
Even as they strike you down  
With the mountain of hatred  
and violence;  
Even as they step on you and crush you  
Like a worm,  
Even as they dismember and  
disembowel you,  
Remember, brother, sister  
Remember:  
Man is not your enemy.

The only thing worthy of you  
is compassion —  
Invincible, limitless, unconditional.  
Hatred will never let you face the beast  
in man.  
One day, when you face this beast alone,  
With your courage intact, your eyes kind,  
Untroubled  
(even as no one sees them)  
Out of your smile  
Will bloom a flower.  
And those who love you  
Will behold you  
Across ten thousand worlds of birth  
and dying.

In a death like that, and love like that, the face of the future will see us.

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