

Epiphany: God Loves to Give

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John 6: 1-15

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Reentry is tomorrow, that glorious day when you come back to earth, the schedule, the job, the drumming beat of what you seek to accomplish. Reentry brings to mind a flaming meteor hurling towards earth, burning away in the heat of our atmosphere until it is only a little like what it once was. Resolutions made in the heavens of our times of rest and celebration are often burned quickly away leaving only a pebble to reach the ground of our reality. Perhaps that's good as we remember what likely happened when a meteor made it all the way.

As we make and enter into our plans for 2011, consider the words of Howard Thurman: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

An 18 year old young woman who calls herself Jennifer the Trepine was inspired by these words. A Trepine is a surgical instrument with a circular blade. Jennifer the Trepine is the name of this young woman's blog. I was engaged by her words, unedited as they are, for she makes clear the tension between our souls wanting to soar through the heavens in glory and having to do the things of this earth. She writes:

I have learned, through trial and error, that passion is almost my only motivator. I don't really have to spend my time worrying whether I am "following my passion," because to be honest, I have never been known to follow much of anything else....

When I was in school, ADD diagnoses had not yet become all the rage, so instead I was just lazy—bright, yes, and capable, yes, but going nowhere. I mean, despite the fact that I had already completed the unabridged *Les Misérables* of my own volition in SIXTH GRADE, turning the pages in morbid fascination as I realized that people used to like sell their own front teeth and build their own barricades in the streets.... I got a D in English my freshman year of high school because I couldn't be bothered to compose Captain Obvious essays about the oh-so-implicit themes in *Lord of the Flies*. I mean, we all get what that book's about, right? Right?

Unfortunately, my English teacher took exception to my logic, and my parents REALLY REALLY took exception to my logic, which is how I found myself spending the next three years flipping through *My Antonia* and groaning over the computer keyboard while my parents jingled the

car keys over my head. (Turns out I had a passion for being able to go places by myself.)

Jennifer is obviously a bright young woman who, in her unwillingness to bend her will to meet the world's demands, felt she was dismissed as simply being lazy. She heard clearly the voice that says "you are going nowhere, but here are car keys if you can just make it through school. Do what the world needs and you will be free."

No! Jennifer's soul shouts out "no! This isn't right." And, on some level, so do our souls. That's what Thurman captures. We who have been made in God's image are meant to respond, not to what we think the world needs, but to what gives us life. Christianly speaking it isn't a what to which we respond but a who. We connect to the one who gives us life.

The trouble is humanity continues to label God as being uncaring, distant, and irrelevant. It is a label that has been with God for a long time. Long ago, when God brought Israel out of Egypt, out of slavery, the people decided God didn't have their best interest in mind and were ready to head back so they might eat once again from what the Pharaoh gave his slaves. God doesn't care about us, they shout in the midst of the wilderness.

Images of God's distance, of God letting the world be the world, abound. Those of us who suffer inexplicable loss wonder how God can make a difference. Unexpected roadblocks get in our way of trying to do what we think we are meant to do. Relationships are hard whether it be a romance or a friendship or a family member. We struggle to know what to do for those who are hungry and poor, those who live in war torn lands, and those who wait outside our stores hoping for a bit of work as economic systems and governments fail to find solutions. Arguing God gives free will and it is that free will that leads to the sins of the world may make logical sense but somehow it doesn't make us feel any better. The world is broken and God, who has the power of creation, doesn't fix it. God just doesn't care. Does anyone have some car keys to a God sized Prius?

The gospel of John allows God a chance to argue back, to write his own blog through Jesus.

So we enter into our scripture. Unfortunately, the first image we have of Jesus is of him sailing to the other side of the lake, away from the people. Not a good beginning.

So I better explain.

In the gospel Jesus has just healed a sick man on the Sabbath which led to the accusation by the legalists of his time, “how dare you break God’s law and heal on the Sabbath?!”

Jesus answers: “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.... If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?” (John 5: 39-47)

Ask what makes you come alive!

Is it ever following rules for rules sake? Is it ever becoming the tattle tale of the law? Would any of you choose that over finding one who truly loves you? That we do...that we burn up our soul in the process...is that not sin?

Now Jesus, having spoken so strongly, gives these legalists time to think and sails across the sea of Galilee. Sailing away on a boat makes for a nice dramatic exit. The crowd, however, ruins the scene. They won’t let him alone. They follow him, scripture suggests, because of what he can do for the sick, as if Jesus were some new remedy one could find at the county fair.

Before they arrive, there is a moment of peace. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. It is a paradigmatic movement, Jesus walking up the mountain as if he is about to give one of his speeches, to tell those who would follow him what it means to be a man and woman of faith. While Jesus speaks a lot in the gospel of John, there will be no sermon on the mount this time. This miracle, the feeding of the 5000, the only miracle to be recounted in all 4 of the gospels, becomes for John the message.

Jesus looks up and sees the large crowd coming near him. Instead of preparing his words, he makes preparation for a meal. Unlike Martha and Mary, he doesn’t have a kitchen or any food stuffs from which to prepare a feast. So he turns to Philip and asks “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” And, Philip, who knows the value of a denarius, says if we used 6 months of a man’s salary, still these people would have only a bite.

No matter how generous the disciples, it is not enough. This moment is focused on God’s generosity. Jesus is the one who gives life.

Andrew arrives on the scene with a boy by his side. While at other times the gospels picture Jesus welcoming the children in contrast to the wish of the disciples, here Andrew brings a boy to Jesus, a boy with the smallest of offerings. The boy has 5 barley loaves, the cheapest of all

bread, and 2 small fish. The fish are like the sardines of Mario Batali, they are meant to be a mere flavoring for the bread.

Just as Philip exclaimed there is no feasible economic way to feed all these people, Andrew exclaims there is no way to make such a small amount of food feed all who have come.

In answer to what has been proclaimed impossible, Jesus says, “Tell them to sit down.” Jesus also sits, taking his place at the head of the table, the place of the Father. On the grassy hillside all sit and watch. Jesus takes the boy’s offering, places it in front of him. He gives thanks. He doesn’t look up to heaven as in the other gospels for Jesus is the Father. And, then, from the 5 loaves and 2 sardines, Jesus distributes the food. From the smallest of offerings, each son, each daughter, is given all they need by his own hand. Everyone is, not just fed, but satisfied.

You have no idea how present I can be to you, says our God.

Sit down awhile and simply receive what God wants to give you. Let us not allow plans for the New Year to make us pass over the joy of the feast served up by God on the grassy hill. Let us not allow our losses to make us pass over the joy of the feast served up by Jesus from the offering of one boy. Let us not allow our past struggles to make us pass over the joy of the feast the Holy Spirit will continue to serve up whether we sit on a grassy hill or in the midst of thorns.

You do know how present God can be.

There’s one last movement of the scripture, an explanation and a warning. The gospel proclaims that “When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.’ When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” Once again, Jesus withdraws. When the people seek to make Jesus a king of the land by force, he withdraws. The Word that dwells among us will not allow himself to become clay in a human’s hands. Jesus came into the world that all might, through him, know the Father’s love and come close to the Father’s heart. For God that was enough.

Today, instead of praying for guidance for what is to come in the New Year (wait for tomorrow morning for that prayer), on this Sabbath day, during this time of communion, try simply sitting with the intention of receiving God’s love. Allow God to feed the hunger inside you. As for the blessing that overflows to others... take time today to imagine one like yourself held close to the father’s heart, someone like Jennifer who has taken

on herself to fight against a label given her long ago. Imagine God breaking through, satisfying such a hungry heart.

What the world needs is people who have come alive!

So spend time on the grassy hill, let Jesus help you come alive, and live ... and live as a son...and live as a daughter... of the One who knew, by his own hand, the 5000 would be fed...then, and now, and forevermore.