

Reflection: As Good As It Gets

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Christian Family Sunday

John 14: 23-29; Acts 16: 9-15

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and Mothers' Day

May 9th, 2010

In the now somewhat old movie with actor Jack Nicholson called *As Good As It Gets*. There is a moment when the movie is capsulated by the quote of the main character. Jack's character is one who is struggling in his own life with what may be a personality disorder and he visits his psychiatrist's office. That particular visit doesn't go so well and in a fit of exasperation and for his own humour and satisfaction—as he is leaving the doctor's office—he turns around to a waiting room full of people—similar to him—perhaps also struggling with what may be too acute sense of reality—and he says out loud for them all to hear: “What if this is as good as it gets?” And then dashes off. Jack's comments—although humorous in the movie—have the psychological equivalent of dropping a bomb in the middle of the room. Here were people likely immersed in life's big questions and anxieties and he plays to their fears—what if this is as good as it gets—what if this is it.

These are the big questions, the longings, the what ifs that are often too big to ask in our everyday world. Or they are the questions that debilitate and consume us. But the gift of such questions and wonderings is that they are a great motivating factor for spirituality and religion. These are the 'more' questions—what if this isn't it—how do we touch upon the something that is more—and so we turn to the paths of spirituality.

In our biblical text this morning we are invited, called, to bear witness to an encounter. In it we initially hear of Paul and his companions as writer Luke records his travels and missionary work. And of particular interest is that Paul has been called away from his own path, or strategic ministry plan, into new territory. As he attempts to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ across the known world he plans, we are told, to go east to Asia Minor; but instead is redirected by the Holy Spirit to go in the opposite direction. He is given a vision that there is a man in Macedonia who is pleading with him for help. So they change course and off Paul goes to Philippi in Macedonia. Once there he follows his typical pattern in a new city. He goes, on the Sabbath, to the local synagogue and seeks out those already devout Jews to share his message. But in Philippi, Paul's first foray into Gentile territory, in Greece, he goes down on the Sabbath and finds not a synagogue but a group of women, worshipping by the river. And this is the place of encounter. Meeting him there—we are told—by the same movement of the spirit is a woman called Lydia. We are really only told two things about Lydia—one that she is a worshipper of God and two that she deals in purple cloth.

These two factors actually tell us a lot. They tell us that Lydia is what we would call today—a Seeker. Saying that she is a “worshipper of God” is saying that she is a Gentile who is drawn to Judaism. She is someone who has already been drawn to pursue holy tradition. The fact that she is a dealer in purple cloth tells us that she is a businesswoman and one that is well off—selling her wares to the wealthy. Purple cloth was considered to be an extravagance that only the wealthy could afford. We learn later, too that she is unique to her time and context in that it appears she is in charge of her own household.

What we glimpse in this encounter on the one hand is one firmly rooted in the religion of his day and clear on God’s work in his life and willing to completely be lead by what he refers to as the Spirit of Christ—and one who drawn not by what she believes or is so convinced of but more by what she is missing, longing for, wondering about—more by what she doesn’t know. Perhaps this is why it is Lydia that draws us to the encounter. We know about Paul’s ministry—it is well documented. But in this one brief passage is Lydia who appears to have it all. Power, influence, wealth, independence, status—and yet wonders about something more—something other, something beyond what she knows—and she goes to the river. She goes to the river where she knows, on the Sabbath there will be others who gather to pray, to know, to believe, to open themselves.

In terms of our own spiritual journeys in our time and place Lydia may be more familiar to us than Paul.

Often in our biblical witness—from Adam and Eve—all the way to Revelation—we hear of people motivated after receiving a vision from God. They are the norm rather than the exception. We may bring an expectation of such clarity of vision and yet not feel as though we receive it. We may be more familiar with the holy longing for something more—that is what brings us to the pew, or to a book or a prayer group or conversation.

Some of you have already begun studying Barbara Brown Taylor’s book *An Altar In The World* as part of our faith formation time this spring. And Barbara is in town this week offering a couple of public lectures. In that book she talks about the shape of spirituality today and is convinced that for a good majority this kind of holy longing for more is what drives most spiritual pursuits. She says: people know that there is more to life than what meets the eye. They have drawn close to this “More” in nature, in love, in art, in grief. They would be happy for someone to teach them how to spend more time in the presence of this deeper reality. (*Altar In The World*, pp xiv) Perhaps this is what Luke means when he says, in reference to Lydia, that “the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly.”

We are not told the details of who makes up Lydia’s household just that they all came to be baptized. But it is interesting that they were all brought along with her in this new transformation. Maybe this was part of the longing. I

know of many who, although they would not put themselves in the category of seeker or searcher—do take that longing on behalf of the children in their lives. What if the day to day realities of our world aren't enough for what we want for our children and grandchildren and neighbours and households. Church, I pray, is not just another community experience for children but one where maybe they will encounter that something "more." Last year, author, Julie Kincaid wrote about kids and consumerism. She was critical and urgent of our climate of consumerism especially as it relates to the youngest members. Her greatest fear, among many, was that by attempting to provide our kids with everything they want and need, we are actually creating a culture of dissatisfaction. That as we market to kids, constantly selling them on what they need and want we teach them to be dissatisfied and to actually believe that we can never have enough. Where are the places where, instead, we can pursue the stuff that creates meaning and connection and depth and a focus on other rather than self. Surely our places [our rivers] of Sabbath and prayer and wondering and encounter still offer that. Maybe our holy longing, like Lydia, is that holy longing on behalf of those we love most.

What is it that motivates us to go to the river?

Throughout this Easter Season, which has only been a few weeks long, during our reflection time you hopefully have felt encouraged to look for appearances of the risen Christ in our midst. We talked about Easter resurrection appearing in our ability to find hope even in our deepest despair, finding an appearance in the ways God calls us to conversion from destruction to wellbeing and to find appearances in the hospitality we offer another. And even more, to be able to share these appearance stories with each other so that our religious communities become—not simply places that offer the same inherited maps to trying to find God—but continually update our stories with new ways of seeing the deeper "more." And to trying to embrace the different ways we will each come to encounters with God.

A few years ago I had the opportunity to study, briefly, with Psychologist Tobin Hart who has done a significant amount of work on the spiritual life of children. (*Secret Spiritual World Of Children*, Tobin Hart, 2003) His whole premise is to turn us, as adults, to be aware of children's inherent spirituality and the variety of forms and paths it takes. Children in his own life opened up the awareness for him in that they seemed to be in constant contact with what virtually every spiritual tradition identifies as unseen worlds. The other, the mystery, the multi-dimensional, interconnected beyond what meets our eyes. Many children live quite comfortably with that awareness but then gradually lose touch with it as they grow and live in the adult world. The stories Tobin shares from the children's stories are not unlike some that we know from scripture, visions, angels, and God's voice. But he adds very important additions to those

ideas. He also reminds that the spiritual life is tapped into through other avenues too—by compassion, by deep empathy at the suffering of other, in the places where our lives intersect with others, in justice work, and last but not least—in asking the big questions in life. He expresses this, of course, so we won't dismiss children's spiritual pathways. But, as is always the case, when talking about children's spirituality, we unearth the same truths about our own as well. Big questions, life questions, holy longing can bring us to the place of encounter—it opens us.

Periodically, in either a church or retreat setting I have come across quilts that have been sewn as expressions of religious/spiritual art—like the fabric art of our hangings. There was one, I recall, where the quilters made squares for each of the biblical women we know about. Eve, and Sara and Hagar and Mary...and not surprisingly Lydia. Lydia always catches my eye because it is woven with deep purple—the colour for the dealer in purple cloth. When I revisit those squares I see not someone who was rich in textile and dependent on her own wealth, but someone for whom that was not enough and who trusted the longing of her heart and followed it.

Lydia reminds us... 'be a worshipper of God' and take yourself to the river of encounter—you might find there—in prayer, in study, in movement, in song, in the vision and conviction of another—a glimpse of the "More" and you will know there is more, and you will leave not perpetually dissatisfied, but aware of how good it can get.

May it be so.