

## “A Burning Call”

Exodus 3:1-15      Romans 12:9-21      Matthew 16:21-28  
Year A, Twenty Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 31, 2014  
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Most of us have heard the story of Moses and the burning bush more times than we can count. Yet most of us still go through the majority of our daily lives without taking off our shoes, recognizing holy ground all around us. Taking off your shoes is very common in the other parts of our world. When I visited Turkey and Greece years ago, for example, as tourists we entered mosques, and left our shoes at the door because those holy places were not to be defiled by shoes carrying dirt in from the outside. Our Christian understanding is not limited to sanctuaries or holy rooms, but when we are at our best we claim that all God's world is sacred and holy, and even the dirt, the soil, has an important place in God's good creation. Unfortunately, we are not always at our best and along with our larger culture often defile the very things that carry God's divine imprint of life and love.

If we are to enter into the depths of the spiritual life, if we are to learn the ways of love and invite an expansive faith in Christ to save us from ourselves, then transformation is needed; and not only once, but in ongoing ways, as a life-long journey, the Jesus Way continually draws us out of sin and into the light of love.

On my vacation my friend, Jason and I rode bicycles on the International Selkirk Loop. The first day we rode from Sandpoint, through Bonner's Ferry to Creston, B.C. Because we knew that 67 mile day would be tiring we scheduled the next day to only be 30 miles. After leaving Creston that next morning in a rain storm, after a while we stopped to take off our rain gear. As the sun started shining more and we left that dark, thunder cloud behind us, we noticed a sign that said there was winery ahead and the tasting room was open. Even though it was only 11 in morning, we thought we'd stop for a break. As the owner greeted us and sat us down to try four samples of his wonderful wines, we got talking with him and listened to his excitement about growing the grapes, how he'd developed certain attributes to his wines based on the growing conditions and location, and we could sense his admiration for the subtleties of complex flavors of the different varieties.

After a while he looked at me and asked what I did for work in Sandpoint. I told him I was the Pastor at First Presbyterian Church. Honestly, I really don't like it when people ask me what I do because most people, including pastors, don't understand what a pastor is, and more often than not, that becomes the end of the conversation; for some reason it shuts people down. But not him. He looked at me intently, and mentioned that he is a member of the Eastern Orthodox Church in Bonner's Ferry. That's when we both realized we had met once before on a Sunday that I had off and my family attended that church. He had been the very first person to greet us that day as we walked in from the parking lot.

Rather than shut down conversation, either the wine or our now remembered connection opened it up and he shared about life and faith from the Orthodox perspective. For example, he mentioned that the Catholic Church (and probably many Protestants as well) did something tragic centuries ago: the criminalization of sin, and making God the reason we

need to repent, that God needs appeased somehow. Rather, the Orthodox view, in his opinion, is that we need to repent to save us from ourselves; God is always loving; it's us that tends to replace God with other, lesser things. He asked me about Presbyterians and we had a great conversation in the context of mutual respect, welcoming hospitality, a listening posture, and appreciation for the other. I look forward to the September 10th Peacemaking event because Father Gregory from the Orthodox Church will be our first guest in this series of interfaith and ecumenical discoveries.

In this morning's reading from Matthew as Peter, who has just claimed the most beautiful confession of Jesus as the Christ, now rebukes Jesus, taking him aside and really getting on his case about all this suffering and dying Jesus was talking about to the disciples, we also learn about God's welcoming love and how it is that we can invite the fullness of that love into our lives. Jesus calls Peter, "Satan" and commands him to get behind him. Jesus points out that because Peter is setting his mind not on divine things but on human things he is actually becoming a stumbling block to Jesus in his ministry. This prompts Jesus to share with all the disciples the call to follow him, and that in following him there is some aspect of denying themselves, taking up their cross to follow.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan, would put this in terms of the false self and the True self, putting your ego in its proper place. So much of our lives are lived out of our ego, our small world created in our mind about how we think life should be. Especially if we live the good life and the world is our oyster, there is little incentive to rock the boat or challenge the status quo or invite change, either externally or in how we think, how we understand the ways we come to understand. Many Christians tend to equate "carrying our cross" with suffering and misery, but even people who are comfortable can carry a cross. For Matthew, the cross here are those things that keep us away from God given, Christ embodied grace and love. Jesus isn't telling us to be miserable, but to not be miserable. Taking up our cross is an intention way of living that puts aside our own self in order to live for others; to claim a cross that project life and not death.

Notice Peter is the one rebuking, Jesus is simply saying. The teaching of Jesus is taught in the context, not of anger and vengeance, but of love, care, the desire to bring healing, vindication in the sense of justice, not violent revenge. Someone once said the vengeance of God is forgiveness; God does it completely different than we do.

Peter, one of the most amazing disciples and the rock of the church, takes Jesus aside and in that space of honesty and sharing comes to hear and learn one of the most amazing teachings about replacing the shallowness of life in our false self with the depth of life in its fullness as we invite God into the heart space of our True Self, our created in the image of God self. Friends, this sounds really amazing but it is so countercultural that it's really hard for most people to get it.

As I was riding my bicycle along a narrow highway with cars and RV's and semis flying by, this contrast in pace reminded me of the importance of the journey and how there is so much that God is doing all around us and inside us that we just skim over or ignore. God invites us to a journey, but we demand and create our lives based on a destination world. Truckers and vacationers and even around town, people are trying to get from point

A to point B as quickly as possible. We create transportation corridors, arterials, roads and highways that have noxious weeds growing along the shoulders and in the ditches, and as trash piles up those lanes of travel get ignored and neglected, overlooked as no-man's-land. The journey would seek to reclaim these lost spaces as holy ground.

In prayer language, we describe this as contemplation, but even this is difficult in a production world. Even Moses, out there keeping the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, he leads his flock beyond the wilderness to Horeb, the mountain of God. When the bush is burning and not consumed it does something that God continues to try and do with us: it gets his attention; out there in seemingly nowhere about as far from the Temple and the known presence of God as you can get, and Moses notices. Peter took Jesus aside. Moses says, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight." Contemplation, attention in the journey, helps us turn aside as we come alongside Moses and Peter to hear The Lord speak.

Moses receives a burning call and it's a call to wake up, to become more aware on wider levels, to feel more, suffering and delights, to take action and put God's care into tangible expressions.

David Rothstein shares about his call to a life as a Benedictine monk and how rather than retreating from the world, a contemplative life actually invites more awareness of our world and as God stirs within, that call to awareness and action is what helps us face what seems so powerful. Like Moses getting called by God to go free a whole nation of people from the most dominant culture in their known world. Moses rightly says, "Who am I that I should go?" Yet God replies, I AM WHO I AM, or I AM WHO I SHALL BE, and promises that God will be with Moses, and worship is the sign that it is God who is doing this. David Rothstein's call toward growth and inner peace through contemplation and action has given him the ability or willingness to see and feel in ways he hadn't before, and he views this seeing and feeling as key to any growth in ethical awareness and justice. He says, "Unfortunately, this awareness comes with a sense of futility: What can I possibly do? The problems are so great. Yet, along with this futility I have felt a kind of holy fire growing in me, a call to justice on behalf of the creatures who cannot speak, and the lands and waters that cannot complain in words that we would hear....I have come to understand more fully that the fruits of the contemplative journey are both inner peace *and* uneasiness. That these are for me not contradictory but complimentary marks of being on a contemplative path. That the journey in has led to the journey out. I want to continue to find ways to aid my fellow suffering creatures, human and non-human, so that there can be an increase of delight in living." (Thin Places newsletter, Sept.Oct.Nov. 2014, Year Sixteen, Issue 1, Number 80, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis MN, page 1 & 2).

The Apostle Paul describes some of the effects of this inclusive life of grace as he says in Romans, "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." And he goes on to say even crazy things, like "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them....and he says throughout this passage in chapter 12 to live in harmony with one another, and live peaceably with all. To feed our enemies if they are hungry and if thirsty to give them something to drink. Friends, this is journey language, not destination; this is hospitality

language, not taking advantage of people as commodities we can use or manipulate for our advantage. This is language that assumes we have our own egos in check, that we are living from the deep well of God's grace and not the shallow pools of our own self interest. These statements assume we can see beyond the illusions of separation and division and claim the unity of connection and that even our enemies at a deep level are our brothers and our sisters through Christ.

I highly recommend that you go on a walk or a bike ride or do something that invites not just reaching a destination, but claims the journey with its sufferings and delights as an important part of following Jesus Christ, and allow that holy fire to grow in you, calling you to justice and joy. And may God be glorified now and forever. Amen.