

An Awakening

Good Morning! And welcome to another Laity Sunday at South Church – or as I like to call it “Amateur Day” (at least the sermon, anyway). It’s a day for our distinguished Senior and Associate ministers to sit back and see how we, the Congregation, do it. Maybe they will hear some of their words coming back - let’s them know we are “getting it”. I’m actually looking forward to hearing what they have to say. Lynne and Dick are wonderful spiritual leaders for us, and we are truly blessed to have them.

Today’s sermon actually began about a year ago, when I was helping Maryanne Purtill prepare for a service in which she was the lead minister. I believe the Gospel story of Mary and Martha was scheduled to be the reading that day per the annual lectionary, so it wasn’t a reading we chose, but rather one we were left to interpret. My thoughts and relation to this reading came to me as a remembrance of a hiking trip I had made with my sister, Laura. Here’s the story as I remember it now:

Some years back, I planned a hiking trip with my sister into the Sierra Nevada mountains in California. She lived in San Francisco, and Elayna and I had recently moved to CT after living 2 years North of Los Angeles. While in CA, I had many opportunities to hike and camp, and I became totally enthralled with the mountains. Now living in CT, I looked forward to revisiting these same areas that had opened by eyes and inspired my spirit years before.

We settled on a "Loop" trail through the Sequoia/Kings Canyon National park. A loop takes you out around the wilderness, only to bring you back to where you started. But it's not out-and-back; it's around and back. The only piece that stays the same is the point at which you start.

Anyway, Jonesing for a long back-country experience I recommended a 7-day trip called the Rae Lakes loop, with the prize being a visit to the Rae Lakes on day 4 - a (reportedly) beautiful set of alpine lakes and meadows worthy of a 4 day investment to reach. I planned things meticulously for several months, secured the required wilderness permits, food, camping equipment, made all the reservations. My previous trips made me feel best-prepared to organize this one, and my sister was happy to let me do my "Big Brother" thing and take the lead.

Funny thing I learned about the route, once we were on it - the whole hike was beautiful, making the Rae Lakes almost anti-climatic. It's a tough hike, mostly uphill, and culminating at one final push over a mountain pass above the tree line at nearly 12,000 feet. Then an easy descent to our goal of the Rae Lakes. And the first thing I thought on arriving was "OK, we made it on-time and on-schedule... man, I can't wait to get back..."

You see, I was focused on “getting there”, and not necessarily “being there”. So when I did get there... the question became “now what?” Because a loop trail is not about out-and-back. You're four days in, and you can't just leave by clicking your boot heels. I started to wonder if I'd made a mistake.

My sister, Laura, loved the Rae Lakes. After dinner, she'd clean her dishes and dirty clothes by the lake-side and think "THIS is the MOST beautiful place I've ever been!" And me, I looked at our map, reviewing plans for the next day, where to next, what needs to be done next. She was there and I was not.

Another funny thing about wilderness hiking and camping - the days are simple but they are FULL of things to do, things that NEED to get done. Cook, eat, clean, break camp, pack, hike, snacks, lunch, filter water, make camp, cook, eat, clean. No clock but the sun, and no shortage of effort. It's a simple life, which can be unnerving at first when you're used to complicated, but as the miles and the days of the other world fade behind you with each footprint, you reach another reality. It's a simple world - a world of HERE and NOW and FOREVER. That started for me after we left Rae Lakes on Day 4, and culminated on Day 6 - our last evening in the wilderness.

From Rae Lakes it's all downhill, so hiking becomes less arduous and more like true sight-seeing. Our last campground was a quiet pine grove along the North fork of the King river in an area known as Paradise Valley. We were the only ones there that evening. After the camp set-up, cooking, cleaning routine, I wandered down to the river in the fading light. Alone, on a large bolder beside a small plunge-pool, I watched the trout effortlessly glide up to the surface and snatch any bugs that came down over the falls. They were patient; they seemed to know that nourishment would come, that they only need be ready. The water was so clear they seemed more like spirits than fish, still and yet moving. A breeze came down the valley, rustling the Cottonwoods across the river in the evening glow... and I swear they were talking to me. I could see it in the motion of the leaves. The writer Annie Dillard in her Pulitzer prize winning book “Pilgrim at Tinker Creek” describes a moment of vision and clarity when she sees “The tree with the lights in it”. A transcendence where we see beneath and beyond the surface world to what lies beneath. The words spoken by the Cottonwoods beside the river that day might not have been understood, but they were spoken and I was listening. There is no beginning nor ending to my memory of this moment. Even as I recall this now to you, I am still there - listening, seeing, knowing.

And the next day we hiked out.

60 miles total, up mountains and back down, around a loop, and back to where you started. Except, your not the same and you never will be.

And so this is my relation to the story of the sisters Martha and Mary. At the beginning, I was Martha. I came to know Mary. And Jesus was there, in the Cottonwoods. It's a strong reading about the realities of life, and the importance of presence and Grace.

And that's only the beginning. Because this experience has gained a second life, through the sharing with others. When we first sat-down to plan-out the service for Laity Sunday, being the good "Congregationalists" we all are, we of course formed a committee. I opted for the sermon since it seemed others thought I had something to say – and if I didn't, they liked the way I sounded when reading from the Bible. Naturally, at our first dinner/Laity planning session, the question on the table was "What do you want to talk about?" At which point Martha and Mary were brought forth, and a discussion of Grace.

Our conversation centered around "What would you do if YOU were there, in the house with Jesus?" What if you could go back in time, into the story, to hear the words from Jesus himself?

One member of our group (and I'm not naming any names) was quite emphatic – "I'd be back in the Kitchen cooking! Food doesn't cook itself, dishes don't clean themselves. Somebody has to go back there so that everyone gets to eat... and that somebody is me". Well God bless that person, for there truly is grace in serving others. And I'll come back to that.

Now with our story of Martha and Mary, imagine if you will that its YOUR house where Jesus shows-up unannounced with his twelve freeloading friends. And imagine he doesn't look like Jesus – but instead he's the neighbor from down the street, or a close friend, or a distant relative. Would you be present then, or would you be in the kitchen?

Fact is, I believe we spend most of our lives in the kitchen, so to speak. We have bills to pay, mortgages, health care, food to buy, vacations, college – (I've got that coming!). You have to eat to survive, and you've got to work to get by. On the flip-side, our labors bring us affluence, and comforts. What we do influences who we are in the community, indeed, in how we see ourselves. I am a Doctor, I am a Teacher, I am an Investment Banker – this is what I do, how I choose to live, who I am. Our lives in this "REAL" world give us a sense of accomplishment, of contribution, and control.

We say "I've got it, Lord" or, "I'm on it", and "I'll let you know if I need any help, but I'm good". And when we do ask for help (as we all do), don't we seem to ask for help MANAGING this life? We ask for help in the kitchen.

Which is exactly what Martha says to Jesus – "A little help here, if you please". And Jesus' response tells us something about Grace – that Mary has chosen a different path, and that it will not be taken away from her.

Food nourishes the body, but Grace feeds the soul. We need food to live, indeed, we have many needs. Grace speaks not to HOW we live, but rather, WHY we live. It reveals God to us and among us. The voices you heard this morning from the Congregation are words of witness to God's Grace in our lives. Moments and feelings which were not planned for, nor earned, nor expected. But they are real, they speak a truth, a truth about what lies beneath the surface of our lives and remains eternal, remains as part of us.

And now one last piece about Grace, not from the Bible story but rather from some thoughts while preparing for this service.

Katrina went through New Orleans a few years ago, and so many people lost everything. A group from this congregation chose to go down and make a difference, volunteering a week or more of their time helping with the rebuilding that continues even today. They put a kitchen in for one woman whose name I can't recall. She said she couldn't express how it felt to have a kitchen again after more than a year without. For her, that was a moment of Grace. That after all her prayers for help, a group of people she didn't know from CT would one day come and put in a kitchen.

And again, a year ago in this church, and at this very pulpit, two young women from our congregation spoke about the tragedies in Darfur. They had taken it upon themselves to do something, to get involved, and to inspire others to join them. That was a moment of Grace for us, to witness our youth – our future – to make a difference. They were saying to us all “somebody has to go back there in the kitchen so everyone can eat – and that somebody is me”.

We see tragedies such as these and struggle with questions like “Why?” and “Doesn't God See What's Going On” – and the answer is Yes if you see it.

And we ask “Why doesn't God do anything about it?” - and the answer again is He Will if you do something about it.

Grace works through love, love for others. If you love others and you serve them, you become the Grace of God in their lives. You are the face Jesus, you are the hands that help, and hold, and heal.

Grace abounds all around us. We have but to awaken once again, to see anew the faces God among us, to open our hearts and allow our souls to be fed. To love as Jesus commanded, and become the face of God for others.

Well, that's a lot from one little reading in Luke. But I've had some time to consider it, and a great deal of help from friends these past weeks. I share these words with each of you this day in the greatest of hope, amen.