

“The Mystical Side of Faith”

Mark 2:2-9

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February 22, 2009

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I have always been drawn to the side of our Christian Faith that emphasizes rolling up the sleeves, getting down into the trenches where life is raw, and making a difference in the lives of real people. We call that our incarnational theology, the embodiment of the spirit. That's why I tend to preach from those Gospel stories where Jesus is touching a leper or hugging a child or feeding 5000 hungry people at a single picnic. The Jesus who is out there in the mud, visiting the prisoner, redeeming the prostitute, welcoming the stranger is the Jesus I tend to relate to. If you've been around awhile, you know this about me. Give me a gunny sack and send me out among the gleaners. Give me a measuring tape and send me to a Habitat site. Give me a red bow tie and a straw hat and send me to a youth mission auction.

But there is another side of our Faith tradition that needs to be honored from time to time. There is a mystical side to our Faith. We catch a glimpse of that side in the Transfiguration story. Jesus is not down in the trenches where life is raw; he's up on a mountain top, maybe above the mountain top, where life is more like a dream. The Transfiguration is an other-worldly scene, a moment of transcendence. Moses is there, and Elijah, characters from the far distant past. The garment Jesus is wearing is glowing brighter than Clorox bleach can make a garment glow.

The three disciples who are there witness a side of Christ they had not witnessed before. They see that there is more to him than a good neighbor, a good teacher, a good friend. There is a part of Christ that is beyond the flesh. There is a part of Christ that is not human at all; a part that is pure spirit.

The disciples, of course, are stunned by this side of him they have not seen before. They are silenced by what they see. The only words that come out of their mouths are some gibberish about building three dwelling places. They are simply awed! They can't quite find words to describe what they experience on the mountain top, but they know it is a good thing they are there. "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here."

The mystical side of our Faith is the side that stands at the south rim of the Grand Canyon, looks out over layers of sedimentary rock representing millions of years in geologic time and **shutters** at the grandeur of it all.

The mystical side of our Faith is the side that lies back on a blanket in a meadow around 11:00 p.m. on an August night and sees Orion's Belt and the little dipper and the north star and other stars that seem to be shooting through the atmosphere, explosions of extra-terrestrial light; and **wonders** what is beyond.

The mystical side of our Faith is the side we encounter when two people who love each other take hands in hand and bow their heads and pray with confidence to a God who has heard their prayers many times before, **and get goose bumps** with the intimacy.

The mystical side of our Faith is the side that sits in the place of no distractions and hears as the disciples heard, "This is my son. Listen to him."

The mystical side of our Faith is the side that asks questions like 'what's the meaning of life'; 'is there one person in the world who is my soul mate'; 'what happens to me when I die'?

The mystical side of our Faith is often under-valued because it doesn't produce a tangible product such as a house or a hot meal or a ride to the doctor's office.

When I get an invitation to attend a silent retreat, I can always think of a hundred more “productive” ways to spend the weekend. But when I come back from one of those retreats, I know that the mystical side of Faith is the bedrock. It is the stream bed. It is that deep reservoir of wisdom that is like a womb, giving birth to revelation and to inspiration and to epiphany.

Spending my childhood summers in South Worthington, Massachusetts, I was introduced to that strange phenomenon of New England farmland. Every spring the land births a new crop of rocks! Where do these rocks come from? Just a year earlier, we had harvested every rock in sight! We had even dug deeply with crow bars to get the big boulders! There must be some deep dark storehouse in the center of the earth that hatches a new crop each spring. The mystical side of our Faith is like that. From some deep place within us, the mystical side keeps breaking into our consciousness with new ways to love, new ways to imagine justice, new ways to establish peace, new ways to welcome the stranger, new ways to be a light in the wilderness, new ways to be in relationship with the sacred.

When those three disciples descend the mountain after the Transfiguring moment has past, they don't have a ten year plan for ending poverty; they don't have a phone number for the Habitat for Humanity office in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; they don't have a job to offer the next refugee family to arrive. What they do have is a knowing, a knowing that God is real, that God is involved in humankind, that God is the One who has come to reveal the more excellent way, the way of love.

In Lakota spirituality we have a ritual known as the Medicine Wheel. It is an ancient spiritual discipline meant to enable a person to find balance. It occurs to me that we all need a balanced Faith, a Faith that honors the side of Jesus we meet in the trenches and the side of Jesus we encounter on the mountain top.

In May, I will make my bi-annual pilgrimage to western South Dakota to attend the meeting of the Sioux YMCA board of trustees. I'll get to jump rope with Lakota children and I'll get to sit in on a quilting circle and add a stitch or two. I'll get to do some drumming with high school students and maybe see what's happening at the Leslie Marrowbone summer camp. In short, I'll get in there where life is raw, in the trenches of the reservation. It will be hugely satisfying to participate in that hands-on side of the Faith. But before I leave the Great Plains, I will stop at a lonely place called Bear Butte, a weird geological mound that sticks straight up on the prairie. It is sacred ground. Lakota men and women have been going there for centuries to be in the presence of the Great Spirit. It's a place apart. I will sit on a rock and I will listen to the wind. I will wait for the voice of God. I will be honoring the mystical side of the Faith. When I finally climb back down, it will be with a knowing, a knowing that God transcends the ages, transcends the cultures, transcends the living and the dead. It will be with a knowing that I am alive because God is alive. My hope is to return home a more balanced person.

This is how the Transfiguration story was speaking to me this week. And I am glad to share this reflection with you all in the greatest of hope. Amen.