

Anna Gilcher: Bearing the Beams of Love

Anna Gilcher

Sermon for Seekers Church

3/20/05 Passion Sunday A

Matthew 26:14-27:66

Bearing the Beams of Love

Have you ever had someone look at you with incredible love in their eyes? Have you ever tried to just sit and bear that look, allowing it to soak into you, into your depths? Not putting up a wall, or trying to escape?

Try it now. Turn to the person next to you, and look at her or at him with love. And allow that person to look at you.

Can you meet that loving gaze? Can you bear the gift and pain of it?

Keep looking at each other until I ring this bell, in about a minute's time...

William Blake writes: "And we are put on earth a little space,/That we may learn to bear the beams of love." [1]

Jesus knew how to bear the beams of love. That capacity to bear the beams of love is deeply intertwined with compassion. And compassion, I am beginning to understand, has a great deal to do with a capacity to be *fully present to what is*.

Today is Passion Sunday. We are called to be present to Jesus' suffering. We are called to com-*passion*, literally to suffering with Jesus.

But we are also called to bearing the love that he has for us.

I have a few thoughts to share with you about what this might mean, to us, today, as we embark upon Holy Week.

Jesus asks Judas when he kisses him (in a different rendering than we heard this morning): "Friend, why are you here?" and invites him to be seen as he truly is, in love. My friend, my companion. Why are you here? Think of the love in your neighbor's eyes a little earlier. Now imagine that you are Judas, betraying this one who loves you and who sees you fully... and still loves you. And you turn away because it's just too hard to bear. And so when Judas later comes to a point of repentance, it is a repentance in which his sin seems irredeemable, and he hangs himself. Judas does not allow the

beams of love to penetrate his heart. He turns toward violence, away from compassion, and does not experience the radical truth of forgiveness, the revolutionary truth of his own belovedness. "All who take the sword will perish by the sword," warns Jesus: the seeds of violence will sow more violence.

If we do not learn to bear the beams of love, *we will resist them with violence*, whether toward ourselves or toward others.

It seems to me there are (at least) two ways that we could contribute to violence in the way we sit with this story. The first is to be like Pilate and wash our hands of it-put up resistance to being present to it by turning away. This is the temptation I usually succumb to. I start glossing over as I read this part of the story, so that I don't have to truly bear the horror of it. When we refuse to allow what is to be, we put up a wall, and we reduce our compassion. And reducing our compassion contributes to violence, within us and in the world.

Another way that we can sit with this story and contribute to violence is in obsessively concentrating on the violence done to Jesus. We live in a society that is addicted to violence. We purchase video games about post office employees gone amok, spraying innocent people with bullets. We watch movies and television shows about stalkers and murderers and rapists. We read detective stories in which murder is entertainment.

Let us not allow our experience of Jesus' passion to be that of the voyeur. May the violence done to Jesus not become for

us a lurid and all-too-common form of entertainment.

May our hearts be vulnerable, rather, to the searing beams of love.

In Luke's version of the story, after Peter denies Jesus three times, he catches Jesus' eye. Again, I think I had always rushed through this part of the story, imagining, I guess... what? Shame... Recrimination... I never really thought about it. It was just too hard. I was not fully present. But at a Lenten quiet day yesterday it was suggested[2]-and I believe this to be deeply true-that this moment of eye contact between Jesus and Peter is a moment in which Jesus looks at Peter with great love and compassion. Unlike Judas, Peter does allow himself to be seen, to be known, and to be loved. He bears the beams of love. He sees himself for the wretch that he is. He weeps. But these tears are the fruit of true presence, true repentance, not violence or despair: they are the fruit of that Amazing Grace that has saved so many wretches... wretches like Peter, and like you and like me. And behold: Simon Peter has begun to learn to bear the beams of love; he becomes the Rock on which the church can be built.

A last thought as we live into this story of Jesus' passion this week is Jesus' gentleness.

A couple of weeks ago I had a very busy week scheduled and I didn't know how I was going to be able to make it through without being hassled and harried and completely stressed out. But it was the way it had to be, so I took a deep breath and plunged in. To my great surprise, everything felt filled with

grace and ease, and the words came into my head and heart, that everything was being **gently given**. It was wonderful. And then it came to a screeching halt. That special favor was no longer there, and I still had a lot to do. I was irritated, too, because if only everything were still being gently given, I thought, I would be able to get so much more done... and so very much more gracefully! But I am struck today by how being fully present to what is, is a way of being in gentleness even *when gentleness is not what's being given*. As Jesus is questioned and mocked and tortured and killed, he is not being treated gently. **Yet he lives into gentleness nevertheless**. When things aren't gently given, they can still be gently taken. Jesus is fully present to what is, to the point of turning away the drugged wine that is offered him, which might take the edge off the pain. Pema Chödrön, a Buddhist nun teacher and writer, says that in order to be peaceful in this violent world, we have to want to lose our appetite for violence or aggression. And to do that, she says, we have to lose our self-righteousness, our desire for self-justification.[3] One remarkable thing about the "conversations" that the different authorities have with Jesus is that he never tries to justify himself. He knows that when we go to self-justification, we are leaving the realm of peace and of presence to what is. We are leaving the realm of gentleness. Chödrön advises: "See what is. Acknowledge it without judging it as right or wrong. Let it go, and come back to the present moment." [4] "We are not working with right and wrong," she cautions. It's something much more revolutionary than that. "We're working," she writes, "with a change at the core of our being." [5]

When we do this, I think, we are learning to bear the beams of love. Bearing the beams of love changes us at our very core.

It is my prayer for us that as we walk through Holy Week this year, we may be truly and gently present to what is. May our hearts be radically open as Jesus asks each one of us: "Friend, why are you here?" Can you bear the love I have for you?

[1] Quoted in Gerald G. May, *The Awakened Heart: Opening Yourself to the Love You Need* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

[2] by the Rev. Karen Johnson

[3] James Kullander, "Sitting in the Fire: Pema Chödrön on Turning Toward Pain," in *The Sun* magazine (January 2005), p. 11.

[4] Pema Chödrön, "No Such Thing as a True Story," in *The Sun* magazine (January 2005), p. 13.

[5] Kullander, "Sitting in the Fire," p. 11.

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