

Anna Gilcher: Yes and Yes

December 12, 2004

A Sermon for Seekers Church

Yes and Yes

Who are you? What do you know to be true? What is your identity?

I would imagine that all of us in this room today can point to a “defining moment” of transformation in our lives, a moment in which we felt God’s transforming power, where we were born again, or turned around in repentance, or where we heard the call to new life and ministry – and on which we have built a great deal of our sense of who we are today.

What is your story?

We know parts of John the Baptizer’s story, but we do not know for sure how **he** would speak of his own transformation, his own identity. We know of his kicking in Elizabeth’s womb when encountering the pregnant Mary, know of his miraculous birth to aged parents, know of his sense of the greatness of Jesus (“I am not fit to untie the thong of his sandal;” “you are the one who should be baptizing **me**”). We know what his ministry looked like. In the gospel reading we heard together last week, John called out from the wilderness: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Throngs have gone out to meet him, have heard the good news of repentance and transformation, and have been baptized, symbolizing their spiritual rebirth into a new, kingdom-of-God way of life. In today’s gospel, Jesus asks the crowds what they have come to the wilderness to see, and describes John as the greatest of the prophets.

The John we recognize is a strong man, the very image of a

prophet. His voice thunders through the wilderness around him, calling to us over this vast gulf of time: Repent! This is truly **not** a reed shaking in the wind, as Jesus humorously puts it. Not a man dressed in soft robes, sitting around in a royal palace. There is nothing small or weak about him.

The John we actually hear speaking this week is not proclaiming, prophesying or exhorting. He is not thundering. He is questioning. “**Are** you the One?” he asks; “or should we wait for another?”

What strikes me in this question, today, is how it is coming from someone who is living in a very different relationship to his own authority than when he was baptizing throngs of people in the wilderness. This is John in prison, not knowing if, or when, he is going to be executed. This is John, cut off from his ministry in the wilderness. This is John, a human being, who, as a human being, must be plagued by fear and doubt and anger and sadness at being in prison, at facing the possibility of death, at being separated from what has been his great work.

Is John, perhaps, craving some certainty? *I remember when I knew things for sure. I remember I had a story that was absolutely true. Let us pin this down, once and for all. Give me a straight answer. Are you the one who is to come? Or should we wait for another?*

Is John the Baptizer finding out what it is like to be a reed shaking in the wind, rooted, yes, not broken, but in touch with smallness and in touch with what it means to bend? Is he finding out what it means when an old identity, an old story does not serve anymore?

Jesus does not actually answer John’s question. In his trademark way, he says to John’s disciples, “Go and tell what you see and hear...” In a way, the answer of “yes” seems obvious. Nevertheless, I wonder. Might not the answer be Yes

and Yes? Yes, I am the one who is to come. Also, Yes, you are to wait for another.

No one has arisen greater than John the Baptist has, Jesus says to the crowds, but the least of those in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is.

Is John finding out what it is like to be the least?

Advent is a time for stripping away, for leaving old stories behind that no longer serve – even beautiful ones, even powerful ones. It is a time for leaving old grids of possibilities behind. It is a time for finding out what is necessary and what is not. For finding out what the gift is in smallness and vulnerability; and for radical presence to what is true now. In the letter of James (the epistle reading appointed for today), we are exhorted to wait patiently for the coming of the Lord, as a farmer waits for his crop to grow. For me, during this Advent, that waiting is about being radically present in the Now.

In her new book *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, (1) Cynthia Bourgeault writes about centering prayer as being perhaps the quintessential Christian practice: of surrendering to God, of being present to God in the Now. (As you will remember, centering prayer is a meditation practice that, instead of using focused awareness concentrates simply on the letting go of thoughts as they arise. A “sacred word” is typically used to help in that letting go, but it is not a mantra, because when thoughts are not arising, the word is gently let go of as well. So there is a continual practice of simple surrender.) Bourgeault’s description of centering prayer and her suggestions for practicing it are very clear and simple, without being simplistic, and I commend it to you if you are interested in exploring the practice. However, what I found really helpful and intriguing in the book was a chapter near the end called *The Welcoming Prayer*. This is a practice of surrender outside of prayer time, in everyday

life, and it is a very simple and elegant path to keeping ourselves in a place of poised freedom rather than being pulled out of Presence into our false, busy selves.

Bourgeault says that when we notice a feeling coming up in our bodies – our stomach hurts, showing us we are afraid; or, our neck and jaw start to ache, pointing to anger; etc. – instead of turning away from the feeling, we should **focus** on it in our bodies, sink into it and **welcome** it. Welcome, fear. Welcome. Welcome, anger.

Then, eventually, as it begins to abate, let it go. Surrender it to God. In this way, we create what she calls “an attitude of inner hospitality” (145). We welcome what is, in this moment. By welcoming what is, we anchor ourselves fully in the Now. Letting it go is a way of welcoming the truth of the next moment, so that once again we are firmly in the Now, just as it is, with no stories to pull us off course into what used to be true.

I find particularly powerful the litany of letting go that the founding genius behind the Welcoming Prayer, Mary Mrozowski, used to use, which Bourgeault includes for us. Rather than simply saying “I let go of my anger,” (or fear, or sadness), she would always say – no matter what the emotion:

I let go of my desire for security and survival.

I let go of my desire for esteem and affection.

I let go of my desire for power and control.

I let go of my desire to change the situation.

I let go of all the ways in which my false self deals with things by fixating on security, affection or control – by wishing to change the situation.

The point is not to get rid of the emotion. The point is that we not allow emotions to chase us out of Presence.

I let go of everything I “know” so that I can be present **now**.

Because God is in the Now, God’s word to us is in this moment, not in a previous one. God’s new creation is in you and in me right now and right now and right now.

Are you the one who is to come? Or are we to wait for another?

Yes, I am; and another moment and another moment and another moment and another moment bring Me again in new and unexpected ways. Each moment is the Kingdom of God. Different from every other moment. Radically present.

John in the prison cell is finding out what it is like to be a reed shaking in the wind, is being called to find out what Presence looks like in this situation. He has had an amazing experience of clarity and drama and call in the wilderness. Nevertheless, it is time to let that story go. Welcome the unfamiliar. What are the gifts of being the reed? Welcome, fear. Welcome, anger. Welcome, smallness. I let go of my desire to change the situation.

So, what is your story? What might you be called to let go, strip away, surrender, so that you can be radically present in **this** moment, **this** Advent?

In a poem called “Tillich’s Lake,” (2) David Whyte puts the call to surrender this way:

*In this high place
it is as simple as this,
leave everything you know behind.*

*Step toward the cold surface,
say the old prayer of rough love
and open both arms.*

Those who come with empty hands

*will stare into the lake astonished,
there in the cold light
reflecting pure snow
the true shape of your own face.*

What did you come out to the wilderness to see?
What have you stripped away in order to see?

Welcome, fear.

Welcome, joy.

Welcome, true shape.

Welcome, Christ.

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- 1) Bourgeault, Cynthia. *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2004.
 - 2) Whyte, David. "Tillich Lake." *Close to Home*. Langley, WA: Many Rivers/Ish River Productions, 1992