

Sandra Miller: Trinity Sunday 2005 Sermon

Seekers Church

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Weeks ago I thought I had an idea of what I wanted to say, but the other day I realized that the word I had heard was becoming distant and wasn't quite there for me anymore. My apologies to Glen who picked the music for today based on the sermon I thought I was going to write.

Sitting in front of the computer as the hours moved on with no coherence or flow to what I was writing, I was suddenly halted in my tracks by the realization that I had not started by praying. That knocked the wind out of me – how could I possibly presume I could bring forth God's word from my heart and experience without first opening up my heart to the source? Praying brought me back to my center and from that came the courage to look for the word that is in me.

Today is Trinity Sunday, a 4th century church construct to celebrate the Holy Mystery at the core of our Christian faith, the Triune being of God as God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I readily admit that understanding God as one and God as also one of three defies my logical mind, as it may yours. Luckily, our understanding is not crucial to our faith. What counts is how faith and experience of God, the Son and the Holy Spirit manifest in our lives. What I can bring to you is vignettes

about my experiences which may open windows into each of your lives, and which tie in to some deeper truth.

This week we were regaled with the story of God's creation of heaven and earth and all the wondrous living things that inhabit the earth. It is such a big story encompassing such a short time period. The impossibility of this story in my logical mind and with my meager study of science was one of the rationalizations I used to turn away from God many years ago and for many years. I did not have room in my heart for the element of Holy Mystery that would allow me to give up the literal reading and live into the beauty of the concept or words – a way to weave together what is known with the largeness beyond human ken that anything at all exists. Thankfully, some of us see very differently than others and are willing to share. The tenderness with which I was treated at my early Faith at Work retreats readied me to read Matthew Fox's vision of a new creation story from his book *Creation Spirituality*. He wrote (pg. 1):

[Story Quoted].

Here was a spectacular picture that encompassed the scientific and the sacred, the suffering and the beauty, and the oneness of God through the divine teachers that came from different faith traditions, both women and men. This was the open door that I could walk through on my way to accepting, as Paul puts it in Corinthians 13:13, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit ..."

I have told the tale of my journey to Christ from several different perspectives before, and do not intend to do so now. As I said a bit ago, I am hoping to throw open some windows for others to see through, the way Matthew Fox did for me by trying to convey how God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are

working in my life currently.

What I understand about my own life is that it is comprised of a series of connected learnings that come about when I am open to God, when I can see Christ in others, and when I lead with the Holy Spirit instead of my head. Having arrived at my age with my particular spiritual and political beliefs, with my personal set of life experiences, I **think** I have some notion of a **few** things.

One is that life is not about happiness, but it is about the intense moments of joy that run through the fabric of our lives and need to be treasured. I give thanks to God every day because these joys are so very numerous. My heart swells at the laughter of my grandchildren, or any child, the miracles of every season (which these days is the blooming of shooting stars and bleeding hearts, irises and roses, peonies and Chinese dogwood), and the fellowship at the table at Joseph's House on a glorious Friday night. Celebrating the joy in my life now is easy; the learning was recognizing that in the unhappy of times in my life, joy was also present. Joy is one representation of the immensity of God the one, while my ability to embrace it is the gift of Christ.

Another notion that I do understand is that we live with the irony that from the moment of conception we are both growing and dying. It is the stuff of our lives that is problematic, especially the suffering.

That Christ suffered, that everyone suffers, is another facet of life I cannot fail to recognize. Recognition is not understanding, but it is a step towards acceptance. Recently I read in, I think, Sojourners Magazine that Sundar Singh, in *Wisdom of the Sadhu* says:

“God uses suffering to call us into the peace of his presence. If God could not use pain and suffering for our good, then He would not allow such things to remain in the world. The grain of wheat must lie in the dark womb of the earth before it can be called forth into the open air by the light and the warmth of the sun. Then it grows into a healthy plant and bears fruit. God has no joy in our pain, but he sometimes uses pain and suffering as bitter medicines for the treatment of souls.”

Wow. This is big for me the way Fox’s new vision of creation was big for me some 13 or 14 years ago. Singh explains so beautifully and succinctly why suffering exists in a way that I can reach out and try to grasp. It is not that others have not said the same thing, it is that here and now this is the perspective that brought forth my ‘aha’ that suffering is God’s invitation to compassion and service, and through compassion and service we find God.

There are as many ways of serving the world, that is, of serving God, as there are people who choose to do so. The fall issue of Faith at Work magazine (pg. 11) has a poem by Veneta Masson called “Pentecost Sermon” that says it for me:

[[Poem Quoted](#)].

I could talk about how the still, small voice in the wind brought me to Joseph’s House where I feel called to serve. Here I have the excellent opportunity to practice cooking as ministry. What I do is not just prepare dinner five days a week, but create a kitchen that is welcoming to staff, volunteers, and residents 24/7, and lay a table that invites

fellowship. This is soul satisfying, and emotionally challenging work in and of itself. It may be where I spend the rest of my working life, if my back holds out and God sees fit. But it is a small part of why God sent me to Joseph's House.

God sent me to Joseph's House to learn to embrace the 'aha' of suffering as an invitation to compassion and service. What I have learned thus far is that I have so much to learn, and that I am rich in teachers. I am daily aware of the Holy Spirit moving in everyone I come in contact with, including myself.

Quoting Joseph's House executive director Patty Wudel, from the Winter 2005 newsletter: "Fifteen years ago next month David Hilfiker put out a call to welcome and become real community for, to reach out with compassion and exquisite attention to, those in our city who are homeless and dying. What we learn day by day at Joseph's House is that when we choose not to protect ourselves from suffering, when we turn toward those who are suffering, when we open our hearts – no strings attached – our energy is renewed, not depleted; we can stay in for the long haul; we can be well and deeply peaceful.

At [Joseph's House](#), we feel called away from 'charity work.' We feel called to become a transforming institution, a place where economic, social and political realities are met and changed. We feel invited by God to become an alternate structure of love and justice that speaks not only to the pain of the few individuals we meet but also to the suffering of the wider soul of the community and society. This is the simple, courageous way of the Gospels. We become willing to understand that which we fear (who does not fear suffering?) –

and willing to allow the possibility of opening our hearts to it. When this happens even a little, change will come, not only for our residents but also for us and through us, for our culture.”

Out of the context of Joseph’s House, I would not have a hint of how to go about this kind of deep soul work. It is a blessing to have David and Patty as teachers, but both of them will readily tell you that it is not they who are the teachers but the men they have been privileged to serve, and that they will never reach the end of the syllabus regardless of the length of time they spend doing this work. And yet, even for me, this is an invitation – daunting but worth the effort.

The basics one hopes to learn in order to continue to learn are: If you look at someone as broken you are working from the assumption that you are the strong one; meet everyone as whole, meet them where they are; listen exquisitely; match your breathing to the person you are with.

You have to leave stereotypes behind. Being homeless, or being sick, or both, does not mean that someone is broken, or less than anyone else is. Homelessness is not necessarily a matter of lacking a post office recognized address. One can have what our society considers a home, but never set down roots. To get beyond thinking that living on the street means not having a home is a huge leap. Friday we took in a new resident, our first woman. I was awestruck when I learned that Rosetta has lived on the street at 2nd and D for some 30 years. 2nd and D is her home more than 1801 Clydesdale Place is mine. She was known at 2nd and D, and while we hope she will come to be known at Joseph’s House, she is in an alien country right now.

You have to leave stereotypes behind. We are each of us in any moment in time the product of all of our experiences, and we are broken and whole all at once. To acknowledge your own and another's wholeness as the place from which you start a relationship lays the foundation for a successful and mutually satisfying relationship. You avoid the pitfall of judging someone else by your own standards rather than honoring them for being the best they can be by their own standards. This isn't easy, especially for a novice, but it is easier when you remember the tremendous chance the residents are taking to leave their chosen environment and comfort zone, and that they most likely had to get clean and sober as well, to come to a totally different kind of place with rules and a roof.

Listen exquisitely, with your whole heart, to what is and what is not being said. The residents of Joseph's House are the real teachers. They have stories to tell, and wisdom culled from living on the edge of society and their lives before they were on the streets. Most importantly, by listening exquisitely you show love and acceptance, which are the greatest of healing tools. This is listening as Jesus did.

Matching your breathing to the person you are with is not nearly as easy as it sounds. Most commonly this is done if someone is bedridden, or in the last stages of dying. It puts you in touch with their physical reality and opens your heart to them in unexpected ways.

I have been at Joseph's House for almost eight months and I have not reached my infancy yet – I am still gestating. Still, I have had some amazing experiences and relationships.

In my tenure, I have not had the opportunity to meet homelessness head on as it were. Until Rosetta came on Friday, we have not housed anyone who chose to live on the streets and was not so sick upon arrival that s/he did not die within a few hours or days. Many of the men I have known have been working poor who lost their rooms or long-term place at a shelter when they were hospitalized. A few of the men had been living with a family member or friend under meager circumstances that would not accommodate their illness. One man came to us after his release from the penitentiary. When they tell their stories I have heard self-awareness about their placelessness, and appreciation for the places they have been that surpasses my own understanding of why I have uprooted myself several times.

Meeting new residents as whole is easier than I thought it would be. The key is to be open to liking them, and if you are successful at that, it is usually a smooth transition to honoring their wholeness. Except for one man whose neediness made me uncomfortable, my experience has been that the men that come to Joseph's House have a strong sense of self, and a deep belief in God, that made them willing to risk coming to the house.

Learning what I am learning from these gifted men, and the few relationships I've developed through Potter's House and time with some of the street folk on Columbia Road, has given credence to the saying that you never know who you'll meet on the street. I cannot deny that there are too many people living on the street with mental illness or substance abuse problems that make them dangerous. But the reality I've come to see is that most people on the street are capable of having meaningful relationships, and shun violence and danger themselves.

In delving a little deeper into what it means to listen exquisitely, I will tell a little story. Jimmy was one of my favorite residents. He liked to hang around in the kitchen, sometimes chatting, sometimes singing oldies to the radio, sometimes just silently drinking his orange juice or coffee. About a month before he died he inexplicably started to stutter. This escalated a few weeks before he died to hours or days when his ability to speak was totally impaired. He would get so angry in his frustration at being unable to communicate, and it was so difficult to watch. Once he composed himself enough to point to his stomach and his mouth to indicate that he was hungry, but conveying what he wanted to eat was beyond him. My heart was breaking when the Holy Spirit moved me to simply stop trying so hard by running through all the choices, and simply to face him, tell him that I loved him and that I would wait until we figured out together what he wanted. I opened my hands palms up towards him and just stood there until he put his hands in mine. We stood that way for about 15 minutes, and he was finally able to say juice. That was the singularly most beautiful time I have experienced at Joseph's House, and I will count myself very lucky indeed if another experience comes close.

It has not been my privilege to be with any of our residents at the moment of death, but I have treasured the time I have spent by the bedsides of a few men as they traveled toward that moment. My sense of breathing in synchrony with someone is to be fully present to the breath of life itself. My mind is empty, my heart is full and the Holy Spirit is a tangible thread of connection between two souls.

These four guiding principles are ways to implement Christ's

teaching to do unto others, as you would have them do unto you. Adherence to this simple concept is the purest way I know of to serve the world, and if I find a way to do it consistently through my service at Joseph's House, I promise to share my knowledge. What I can share now is a thinking tool for trying to do this that my friend Kathleen shared with me.

One of her favorite yoga teachers, Nischala Joy Devi, says that we are all really one great consciousness and that it is really just an illusion that we are separate beings. Her analogy is that of taking water from a well. She says that if in the morning each person in a village draws a cup of water from the well, then their cup of water appears to be separate from the rest of the water in the well. However, if at the end of the day everyone returned their cup of water to the well then it would all be one water. Even one drop of water contains everything that is water.

We are all one in God.

Amen

I pray that Seekers, one and all, and all together continue to walk the road less traveled by.