

“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” by Sandra Miller

8 July 2012

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 19:14 according to Nan Merrill, Psalms For Praying

Let the words of my mouth

and the meditation of my heart

find favor in your Heart

O my Beloved, my strength and

my joy!

Kate always started, as I have, our sermons with this prayer from Psalm 19, and today is no different. In just a few weeks we will mark the anniversary of her death, each in our own way. Sadness and gladness for me will walk hand in hand in my remembrance of Kate. I still miss her terribly, especially in the way her wisdom helped to anchor me in the daily structures of my life. Yet, I look around this sanctuary, at those present and those who can't be with us today, and I see reflections of Kate and her goodness in every face. It isn't fair to single people out, but how can I not remark that she must be dancing in heaven as she looks on Jackie's and David's lives today. We all know that she was a vital part of their welcoming into Seekers, and more importantly welcoming them

into the being and becoming of their lives now. *Todo cambio* – everything changes.

I keep referring back, from different perspectives about the time Kate shared in Celebration Circle that she couldn't compartmentalize her life; that her spiritual life was a common thread that tied it all together. Her love for and life with Carole, her roles on the Servant Leadership Team, in Celebration Circle, with FLOC, and on the Sacred Conversation Planning Committee were all part and parcel of one whole beyond what was obviously visible to the world. Today I see that her sharing had a domino effect on what I had been seeing as pieces of my life, toppling them over and laying them all out in intricate patterns, but all touching each other and making up one whole. In the following quote from Jan Richardson's *In Wisdom's Path*, Kate for me, and for many was the vessel and the bidder:

We are the vessels of God's voice, her words blowing through us, bidding us to tell the tales that only we can speak.

Being a storyteller, these words are an invitation. Yet, after enthusiastically signing up to preach it never fails that when I sit down to write the sermon, facing the blank page I wonder "oh my God, what was I thinking?!" Paraphrasing liberally from today's Psalm; I panic, want to take flight, trembling takes hold of me, and I am in pain as of a woman in labor. As I read the passages from Samuel, Second Corinthians, and Mark, as well as Psalm 48, I had no idea what to hang my sermon on. What I could relate to was the theme for this After Pentecost season of "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" I am a clueless apostle. And then it happens, as it inevitably does that grace shows up born on the wings of the generosity of the Body of Christ. In this instance it was Shelley (who

most of you know), who acted as the vessel of God's voice, bidding me to tell the tale that only I can speak. And we had a lovely lunch too!

Shelley pointed out the obvious theme running through the readings as being sent forth guided by God. What a perfect tie in is that to those questions "Why are you afraid?", and "Have you still no faith?"

Late last year I began to feel fragmented and unsure of how God was calling me. I felt neglectful of my calling as an artist, of my quiet time with God, terribly overextended, and not just tired, but exhausted. While not a new revelation, it hit me in a different place of my being. I didn't suddenly have any understanding of the actual blockages preventing me from becoming what God wants of me in that or this moment. What was revealed was the simple fact that I had suddenly become re-compartmentalized, or was at least seeing myself as compartmentalized again. The domino pieces had stood up, seemingly of their own accord, and the patterns of my life were out of sync, becoming random puzzle pieces I had no idea how to fit back together. I was struggling, very much afraid. Though not bereft of faith, faith had become a recluse who had retreated into the furthest reaches of my heart and mind.

You can well imagine my surprise then when one day, sitting at my desk at work in the midst of typing an email, faith exploded in my consciousness with the message "take a sabbatical from Celebration Circle." I was afraid before, but now, well, compound that exponentially. My self-held identity in my faith, in my Christianity, was, I thought, integrally tied to my place in Celebration Circle. Was God setting me

adrift on unknown waters? Celebration Circle was part of that larger picture I called home, but suddenly I wasn't called to offer anything there. Panicked and trembling as I was, I could not deny the clarity of the message that kept playing in my head, so at the beginning of February I took a four month sabbatical from Celebration Circle in the hopes that freeing up the time normally given to that mission, relieving some of the stress in my life, I would in fact have some spacious time to figure it all out. In my better moments I envisioned my back porch/art studio being whipped into shape, and all the energy for actually making visual art would start flowing. Hmm, well that's not exactly what happened.

I don't do the whole God put a thorn in my side thing, or the Satan thing, but I read about God saying to Paul that "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.", and gee, golly, whiz, I hope it's true because it is an incredible message of hope! I can be flawed, broken, and a sinner and God's grace will still enfold me, hold me, and support me on the journey that, like the apostles I was being sent on.

The first weeks went by and I spent some of that free time on the couch with the TV on, the computer on, and only partially paying attention to either one. The truth is that months went by and I had lots of false starts because I thought that I was in control of the process of my discernment and becoming.

Through it all, I had not absented myself from my other places of engagement. I was still going to work, I was still in the Eyes to See, Ears to Hear Peace Prayer Mission Group, I was still moderating the Sacred Conversation Planning Committee, and I was still engaged with some people from outside those

structures in more than social relationships.

Like the Apostles, I went to places where I wasn't welcomed, and had to shake off the disappointment and continue on. Unconsciously I was processing every individual part of my life, every experience I had, no matter how small or large, sifting them for the lessons I might learn. What happened was the domino pieces started rearranging themselves, aligning themselves in an order that, when the tipping point was reached, would allow them to fall into a cohesive pattern again. As I tell the narrative of this leg of my journey, I will no doubt see things I have never seen before.

A friend of mine, Deborah's oldest daughter Sharyn, sends me a quote/action of the day a couple of times a week. (Think a secular, sometimes vaguely spiritual [Inward/Outward](#) reflection for context.) Maybe two months ago she quoted G. K. Chesterton: *"Do not free a camel of the burden of his hump; you may be freeing him from being a camel."* Followed by: *"Your action for today is to see if you've wanted to help someone who doesn't need or want your help."*

It caused me to take a look around at work and think about the fact that everyone who works at Community Vision wants to remove the camel's hump of addictions and mental illness from our clients who we see as suffering, even when they don't want help. The fact is that we can't force them to go to any kind of treatment so we aren't in fact removing the humps of those who don't want to be helped, but we collectively want to, and I sure wanted to. The invitation, the place I was sent where I was welcomed as an apostle, was to live in the tenet of Church of the Saviour to meet people where they are. I was called to a new understanding of the hospitality the Community

Vision program offers to homeless men and women put best by Henry Nouwen:

Hospitality means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment. ¹

Living with this new understanding as much of the time as I possibly can has allowed me to love the clients again as a collective whole, and not get tethered to the daily exasperations of individual clients who can be a real challenge to my faith. I had lost my ability to love them individually, well, except for a few, quite some time ago because, quite frankly, it is an impossible task. But to love them as a collective whole has opened up vistas inside my own soul that help me to value what I do there as integral to the wellbeing of staff and clients alike, even if I am not in a position to minister to individuals. It makes going to work every day more meaningful and more fulfilling. Happily, I haven't removed a hump from any camel, but maybe what I've done is to add a hump to my own spiritual being that I can draw holy water from as needed, a source of seeing hospitality to myself as a way of being. The first opening.

At some point shortly after this I reached out to Richard Jaeggi of the Gandhi Brigade, whom you may recall preached a couple of months ago. I wanted to touch base with him and talk at length about jumping out of the airplane without a parachute that he had spoken of in his sermon because I could see myself in free fall. As we talked he asked if I had information about this thing or that thing that could be

useful to his mission, and I was surprised and delighted to learn that I did. I was sent and did not know it, and I received a very warm welcome indeed. Not just a welcome but a request to be in an ongoing relationship that would allow me to offer some of my small body of nonprofit knowledge that wasn't being used in my own work life. Like Paul, I am not boasting about my strength – and this is probably my first personally substantial lesson in how to read Paul as more than a big ego personality – but I am revealing a weakness in myself. I did not know that I wasn't meeting my own need to share what I knew was of value, and there was grace opening another door.

At the February meeting of the Sacred Conversation Planning Committee most of the members made a commitment to be as involved as individually possible in the New Jim Crow DC Group 4 Change, an outgrowth of several of us being involved in a book group that read Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*. I had taken part in a few of the monthly meetings of the group but now I responded to being sent forth again, and again I was welcomed. This also led, through Trish's and my involvement in both places, to Eyes to See sponsoring a March presentation to Seekers about the issues of the mass incarceration of people of color, and the prison industrial complex resulting from the privatization of prisons. I fell on fertile ground in the NJC DC and got a larger understanding of how being engaged here was connected to and fed me at work, in Eyes to See, and in the context of the Sacred Conversation. As these pieces melded together I truly recognized that I was not in control of my discernment, and off in the distance a new perspective was waiting to be revealed.

Somewhere else in here I reached out to Mark Greiner to get together, which we hadn't done for some time. At that meeting

I learned more about Takoma Park Presbyterian's plans to do some community building by offering low to moderate income people a place for entrepreneurship connecting to the farm to table movement. Mark has put a tremendous amount of work in to making this happen (and I am happy to say that I found out last week that they got their permit for the kitchen), and what I came away from that first meeting with was that running this program could be my next job. We've talked in person a few times, and emailed a lot, and while I am still supporting his efforts as much as I can, it turns out, as I just discovered in the last week or so, that I am not being sent here in more than the role I already have. In a flash of recognition I saw that it might be Lauren's next job, which has yet to be explored, and in any case needs to be funded.

Next in the sequence, I think – some of the order of things is a bit murky you understand – was a realization that being absent from Celebration Circle left a deep yearning in me for Eyes to See to be more as a mission group than we were. I yearned for a group commitment to work with spiritual disciplines which we had not been holding each other accountable for, and to share more deeply each week from our lives certainly, but from our lives as they related to our spiritual journeys. We were doing work in the world as a mission group, and we were supporting each other in our individual work in the world, which is why I was in the group, but I wanted the “more” that I had experienced in Celebration Circle as a result of years of trust building and a concentrated common mission. If I wasn't going to be able to get what I needed from Eyes to See, I didn't know what I was going to do. God was sending me out again with a message that was very hard to carry to people I very much loved. What happened when I told the group what I yearned for was that I was welcomed and not sent away shaking off the dust, having voiced what others were working with.

All these places I have been sent that were positive experiences are not the whole story. The New Jim Crow group was invited to a planning meeting for a Wells Fargo boycott teach-in being offered by the Prince George's Peoples Coalition. Others, like Trish, have a big place in this sending forth. I felt very privileged to be included and participated in the conversation that took place only to find when the meeting notes were sent out that comments Trish and I had made were conflated, taken out of context, and used to call me/us racists. I am not like Paul who is content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ. I do not feel strong when I am in fact weak. Many hard emails ensued, no offer of meeting in person to talk about how we got here was accepted, and the voice of the one person who put this out into the world has not been countered by anyone else of the nearly 20 other people who were present. And we, the New Jim Crow, as well as Trish and me, are still included in the continuing planning for the event. Clearly there is still a great deal of work to be done in this age of colorblindness! Are Trish and I welcome this coming Tuesday night, or are we simply invited to contribute to the larger good? Will I leave the event knowing that I showed up, did what I could, but need to shake the dust off my sandals and move on? Or will I find a place at the welcome table?

There's more, but what all this sending forth has revealed to me is a confirmation that I am about work in the wider world.

I have taken my leave from Celebration Circle, though I left the door behind me ajar, and have said to God, right here and for right now I will do my best to go when and where you send me. Tomorrow I will start a new week at Community Vision, Tuesday I will go to the teach-in in Capitol Heights, Wednesday I will go to the first Eyes to See meeting since our

amazing retreat, Thursday I will go to meet with a real estate lawyer about buying Jill's condo, Friday I will pack my bags, and Saturday morning I will fly to Guatemala. Send me. I will try my best to keep the big picture in focus even as I tend the individual pieces. The pieces may seem numerous but none are onerous, and the grace is their interconnectedness.

I can relate to David who must have been at least a little afraid of being asked by the leaders of all the tribes to be the king of all Israel. My place in the world is no kingdom but the domino pieces of my life seem to have realigned themselves, reached the tipping point and are once again arrayed in a complex pattern making up a cohesive whole. I am afraid some of the time, maybe even all of the time, but my faith has been restored.

Todo cambio – everything changes.

Thank God we're all in this together.

Amen.

1 from *Reaching Out* as quoted June 13, 2012