

Try a Little Tenderness

Luke 24:13-36

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This past Tuesday in Vancouver, a group gathered for the TED International Conference. TED, as you know, brings in influential speakers from all over the world to crowds which pay \$10,000 to hear the latest innovative thinking on just about anything. But on the evening of April 25th, a surprise guest appeared on the screen in one auditorium: Pope Francis.

It was recorded, of course. I watched his 17 minute TEDtalk, and then read some reactions of those who were in the room. Courtney Martin, a columnist said she was surprised: "I sat in the audience as the silence settled over the crowd. Rather than seeing this 80-year-old priest's message as out-of-date or cliché, rather than pushing back against the value of religious belief writ large, it seemed like the TED audience was actually starving for his words."

I was intrigued. Given all of the media talk in the last few years about the rise of the "nones" (those who claim no particular religious affiliation), that there was something to what the pontiff was saying which seemingly hit a deep nerve, at least among that group.

Pope Francis' talk went over three areas. The last stood out to me in particular. He urged his audience. "There is a need for a revolution...a revolution of tenderness... And what is tenderness? It is the love that comes close and becomes real. It is a movement that starts from our heart and reaches the eyes, the ears and the hands. Tenderness means to use our eyes to see the other, our ears to hear the other, to listen to the children, the poor, those who are afraid of the future." Pope Francis TEDtalk

It may seem a bit odd that a bid for tenderness would be called revolutionary. Perhaps that would have been so at any other time...but not now. Not when a person can be annihilated by an online post, a comment said in the open or in hidden conversation, or an op-ed.

Don't get me wrong, diversity of opinion is healthy and essential. It's how something said, the context in which it's said, and the intention which can alter the outcome.

The Gospel text from the lectionary this morning is one of my favorites. It's commonly known as the Road to Emmaus. It takes place in the wake of the Resurrection discovery. Later that afternoon, as the stunning word had just begun to spread, we see what the Risen Christ, was up to. Luke's account is a bit different from what we read on Easter morning from Matthew's

account. Remember, in his appearance to the two Mary's earlier in the morning, the Risen Christ had appeared to them while they were on their way to tell the disciples, telling them to go to Bethany where he would meet up with all of them there. In Luke's account, the women go to the tomb and encounter two men dressed in dazzling white. They tell the women the resurrection news and the women go and tell the disciples. The Risen Christ does not appear to anyone until later as we read in our text this morning, when they are all gathered.

This encounter with Cleopas and another person who many scholars have thought to have been his wife, is the first appearance in Luke of the Risen Christ. The two were walking and self-absorbed in their grief over Jesus' condemnation, his death and now his missing body. Can't you imagine it? Then the Risen Christ began to walk with them. The text says, but *their eyes were kept from recognizing him*. He asks them about what they have been talking about. They basically say...are you for real? You haven't heard what's been going on over the last few days?

Now we don't know exactly why Luke puts this part of their eyes were kept from recognizing him. But perhaps it's something like this: have you ever been so wrapped up in your own story, in what's happening in your own life that you haven't been able to hear or receive the presence of another person in your midst? In that state there's no room for tenderness or connection, is there?

We've all done that. I have done that. It doesn't feel good, because it feels like I've just dumped on another, and used them in a way where I am not then in a position to hear them.

But thank God that when I have been in that place, there have been people who have been able to listen to me with tenderness and compassion.

You know people like that, don't you? People who make you feel that you're the most important person in the room and that there's nothing else they'd rather be doing than listening to you? Just yesterday I heard stories about a man who had that gift. And his gift of compassionate and tender listening now outlives him. We could all use a good dose of that, right?

Theologian Frederick Buechner connects that gift back to our scripture passage. "I believe that although the two disciples did not recognize Jesus on the road to Emmaus, Jesus recognized them, that he saw them as if they were the only two people in the world. And I believe that the reason why the resurrection is more than just an extraordinary event that took place some two thousand years ago and then was over and done with is that, even as I speak these words and you listen to them, he also sees each of us like that." (Buechner blog)

We all need to try a little more tenderness, don't we? I do...

In my last parish in Greenwich, the area clergy regularly officiated at the worship services at the area nursing homes. It wasn't a difficult thing to do, I usually gave a shortened version of the sermon I had given the previous week. The service also included communion.

One day, I was on the schedule to go to Greenwich Woods. I had been there plenty of times before, but this particular day, I was tapped out. So much was going on in the congregation and this was one more thing I had to “fit in” during that busy day. Somehow, though, I always loved going there. I knew the people really appreciated it.

That particular day, I noticed a couple I hadn’t seen before. It seemed to me that they might have been in their early 70’s. The woman was in a wheelchair and her husband came in and sat beside her. I introduced myself to them and Bob and Betty cheerfully greeted me.

Since I had been rushed in getting there, I didn’t have extra time to visit, and I started right into the service. I noticed that this couple knew all of the hymns and sang with gusto. You could tell they meant the words they were singing, because their faces were filled joy. I can still remember it all these years later. I was intrigued. There must have been some back story, I thought.

When the 30 minute service was over, I started cleaning up after Communion. I made my rounds to say individual good-byes to the residents, but noticed that Bob scooted out very quickly. He said he needed to run up to his room for a minute, so I stayed and visited with Betty a bit longer, long enough to hear that their daughter had just been diagnosed with MS. The hope with which Betty spoke, told me that she had had long conversations with God about this.

Bob soon returned and handed me a book. I glanced at it quickly and saw it was on prevention of stress and tension. He opened up the front and wrote a note and then handed it to me. He then said words which startled me, “God told me to tell you, ‘thank you for doing His work so well.’” He then turned and wheeled his wife out the door and on to lunch. I stood there, a bit stunned, as you don’t often hear such affirmation.

A few days later, long after I had returned back to the office, I glanced at the book I had flung on my desk. Funny thing. The picture on the back of the book looked strangely familiar. It was a younger Bob.... Bob was the author. A renowned medical doctor who had developed the ***Gerish Method of Stress and Tension Prevention.***

That morning, Bob had seen that I needed a little tenderness. His humility didn’t allow him to tell me about himself. That was part of the gift. Maybe he knew I wouldn’t have been able to have taken it all in. So he kept his focus on me.

In going back to our scripture lesson, I wonder how the conversation might have changed if Cleopas and his wife had recognized the Risen Christ as they were walking? No doubt their focus would have changed from a telling of a story to a life-changing and **tender encounter.**

Life is about encounters isn’t it? Encounters with God, with ourselves and with others.

Stanford psychologist Kelly McGonigal says, “To feel less lonely in your stress, two things help. The first is to increase your awareness of other people’s suffering. The second is to be more open about yours.”

There was a meme online that I saw this week with Robin Williams' picture on it and these words: ***Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind always.***

You may remember that Williams suffered from mental illness, deep depression, which surprised many after his death.

What if we practiced a little more tenderness in our lives?

I shared this story at the Easter Sunrise service this year...(my apologies for those of you who were there and are hearing this a second time)There's a wonderful story that explains, even there, God brings redemption and life...

A water bearer in China had two large pots. Each hung on the ends of a pole which he hung across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water. At the end of the long walk from the stream back to the house, the cracked pot arrived only half full. For a full two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water to the house. The perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect for which it was made. But the cracked pot was ashamed of its imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do. After two years of what it perceived a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your house." The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were only flowers on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side?" That's because I've always known about your flaw, and I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back, you've watered them." For two years I've been able to pick these flowers and decorate the table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house.

The columnist writing about Pope Francis' TEDTalk said, "At a conference known for its culture of young people celebrating "moving fast and breaking things," here was an old man talking about slowing down and really seeing people. To relate on the same level as someone else.

Pope Francis said, "Each one of us is irreplaceable to God. Each one of us is precious to God. Through the darkness of today's conflicts, each and every one of us can be a bright candle, a reminder that the light will not overcome the darkness and never the other way around.

Tenderness is the pathway of choice for the strongest and most courageous men and women; tenderness is not a weakness. It's a fortitude."

There's been a wonderful movement which has begun amid the divisions of so many in the country. It's called 100 days/100 dinners. It is the brainchild of a clergywoman in the south. The idea is to sit down at a table and basically to meet new people, to talk with them and hear their stories. In a sense to practice tenderness, if you will over a meal.

It's no accident that the Risen Christ in our story was finally revealed when they broke bread together. Before each meal groups are asked to join in a poem by Mickey ScottBey Jones

Together we will create brave space

Because there is no such thing as a "safe space"

We exist in the real world

We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds.

In this space

We seek to turn down the volume of the outside world,

We amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere,

We call each other to more truth and love

We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow.

We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know.

We will not be perfect.

This space will not be perfect.

It will not always be what we wish it to be

But

It will be our brave space together,

and

We will work on it side by side.

As we go forth from here...let us try a little tenderness....

Amen! May it be so!