

HOLY LONGING, HOLY THREADS

There's a thread you follow. It goes among things that change.
But it doesn't change. You don't ever let go of the thread. ~William Stafford

Embedded in my memory is the image of a young boy, perhaps 4 years old, who took us at our word several weeks ago – as soon you may too – and came forward to receive Communion. Our word at Stanford Memorial Church is one that welcomes all to this holy feast of bread and wine, regardless of age, background, religious affiliation or none, experience, understanding or otherwise. He took the bread and then moved to Jordan – one of our student volunteers here this morning – for the next step. Most all who take Communion with us choose to lightly dip the bread into the cup as we say “the cup of hope.” Such was not the case for this particular 4 year old. He ate the bread, nearly grabbed the cup from Jordan's hands, and rather than take what would be a customary sip, took an undeniably generous gulp. In a clear, confident and loud voice that all could hear he proclaimed: that's really good! Needless to say, it took Jordan, me and a number of others some time to recover from that and compose ourselves. It was a magnificent, beautiful, and holy moment.

There are a number of reasons this image has stayed with me. To be sure, it's sweet, rare, innocent, and humorous. More so, I believe it has been hard for me to shake because on some level it seems a counterintuitive image. Particularly as we think about not only the conditions and crises of our current common life as a nation and world, but also as we now find ourselves in the Christian liturgical season known as Lent. The Girl Scouts are out in full force selling cookies.

While many observe or understand Lent as a season to restrain, to constrict, to contain – others have suggested that it is all about abundance. Writer James Alison puts it this way: “When we focus on a time of renunciation and discipline, these are not ends in themselves, but the conditions necessary for the enrichment of our imagination. Almost nothing is more difficult for us to imagine than something coming from nothing. Yet that is the signature of the presence of God, the Creator of all things. For God it is no

problem to create something out of nothing. For God, scarcity, which is easier for us to imagine than abundance, is absurd.”¹ And so that image of the four year old at Communion has stayed, while simple in form, because it gave me some pause to comprehend what often does seem counterintuitive especially in present and contemporary realities – an exuberant, confident but uninhibited recognition that sacred and sustaining ritual creates an opportunity for anyone to receive abundance in unsuspecting containers and to declare that it is really good.

The second image that has kept mysteriously appearing and reappearing at different times and places of late for me is from the poet William Stafford called The Way It Is:

There’s a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn’t change. People wonder about what you are pursuing. You have to explain about the thread. But it is hard for others to see. While you hold it you can’t get lost. Tragedies happen;

¹ The Christian Century, February 20, 2013.

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people get hurt or die; and you suffer and get old. Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding. You don't ever let go of the thread.

Pondering these words for quite some time now has caused me to consider more deeply what the thread is for me. There likely isn't only one but I imagine a collective tapestry of several have woven themselves into a single, strong and sustaining thread. Though at different times in life it has felt as though it were unraveling I have never let go. What about for you? What is your thread?

There are some profound and consistent threads running through the scriptural texts we heard this morning. The Psalm that Stevie read for us is often considered one of the truly great pieces of devotional writing in all of human history. It has been described as a rich and textured assessment of the divine-human relationship, as well as an assurance of divine help in times of peril and trouble. It conveys the ultimacy of God, which against

this backdrop we imagine the possibility that joined with faith in God to whom the faithful might have access, human vulnerability can be broached without fear. As

needful beings, humans must be assured that the God of ultimacy is within reach and accessible. The psalmist, no stranger to the inhospitable and arid expanses of land in the Judean plains, gives us poignant imagery to denote human vulnerability and need. Here the needs that humans have for the ultimate transcend mere physical ones, even prized water in the desert. Human thirst is for the ultimate – a thirst deeper than that which wells can assuage and even cannot be assuaged on our own terms. “O God – I seek you, my soul

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thirsts for you.” In my mind, this psalm begs the question: What are we longing for? Does any part of my thread, your thread reveal, as this psalm attests to, deep longings of the human heart for God, for what is holy, transcendent or divine?

If we get stuck in our skepticism, our smallness of mind or settling for too little, could this ultimately be a failure of imagination rather than the assumption that a search for God is pointless and unrealistic? Some would argue that it is only the imagination, which is ultimately fixed on the abundance and generosity of giving, is empowered to stretch beyond itself and keep us from settling for too little. Maybe the abundance held out before us, as depicted in this psalm as God’s *hesed* (meaning gracious intervention) love and loving-kindness associated with preserving our life ultimately helps us grow, even risk and change. And I would argue, more importantly, fosters resilience, even optimism in our lives. I think many of us would agree that whether collectively or individually, we are in great need of both.

Popular culture and secular images also provide venues through which we understand counterintuitive principles of abundance and give us contemporary examples of what it means to not let go the thread. It should not be overlooked that two of the most popular Oscar contending films this year, strange and idiosyncratic movies, resonated with millions of people. *Silver Linings Playbook* and *Life of Pi* were imbued with themes of resilience and optimism that speak to us. Despite the voices of critics, the key insights in each movie, whether their creators realized it or not, were grounded in a growing body of scientific research. Writes Emily Eshfasani Smith in *The Atlantic*: “Far from being delusional or faith-based, having a positive outlook in difficult

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circumstances is not only an important predictor of resilience – how quickly people recover from adversity – but it

is the most important predictor of it. People who are resilient tend to be more positive and optimistic compared to less resilient folks; they are better able to regulate their emotions; and they are able to maintain their optimism through the most trying circumstances.”

Dr. Dennis Charney, dean of Mount Sinai School of Medicine interviewed 750 Vietnam War veterans held as prisoners of war for 6-8 years. Tortured and kept in solitary confinement, they were remarkably resilient. Unbelievably, they did not develop depression or post traumatic stress disorder despite the extreme stress they endured. What was their secret? Interviews and tests revealed for Dr. Charney ten characteristics that set them apart. The top one was optimism, followed by altruism. Humor and having a meaning in life – something to live for – were also important.² Please do not misunderstand that I am suggesting that mental health illnesses such as depression and bi-polar disorder, post traumatic stress disorder can be resolved simply by being more optimistic. It is not at all what I am saying. It is worth noting however that research such as this reveals very striking examples of how individuals in the most dire of circumstances possess a thread that have seen them through extraordinarily difficult times.

Counter-intuitively, another study found that facing down adversity by venting – hitting a punching bag or being vengeful toward someone who makes you

² Emily Esfahani Smith, The Benefits of Real Optimism, The Atlantic; March 2013.

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angry – actually leads to people feeling far worse. Not responding at all to anger was more effective than expressing anger in destructive ways.³

For example, if we look more closely at the gospel today from Luke, there's a corresponding illustration. We have no way of knowing whether or not the atrocity story the Galileans told Jesus ever happened. What is clear is that it was an appeal to his nationalistic sympathies. He is expected to hear the story and galvanize in heated moral superiority with his countrymen, very much against the outside Romans, those inhuman forces of evil. But Jesus doesn't take the bait – he won't go along. He does not tell his countrymen that the occupying Romans are the epitome of goodness, or that their oppression is anything other than oppression. He will not be defined nor have his inquirers defined by enemies and will not partake in self-righteous anger. As often happens particularly in the gospel of Luke, Jesus confronts those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.

Does any of this sound familiar? Most of us would agree that we live in a time not so unlike the atrocity rumoring Galileans. Everyone wants to blame everyone else for the ills of our world and society. Fundamentalists blame Hollywood, the ACLU and gay people. Liberals blame fundamentalists,

³ Ibid.

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militarists and pharmaceutical companies. Republicans blame Democrats. Democrats blame Republicans. Believers blame atheists. Atheists blame religion. Some of this I certainly would contend has its validity and warrants civil discourse, but this is not the point of today's gospel in the end. In the midst of all of the noise, Jesus says hold on. Think about an old fig tree - one that has not produced any fruit for a long time. The farm owner says cut it down. The gardener says wait a minute. I'll aerate the soil and throw some manure around and give it one more year to produce.

This is why I love the parables in the Christian gospels. Just when chests are being puffed up and there is hysteria around wiping evil off the face of the earth, Jesus knocks people off their moral high horses. His parables bring us down to earth, back to ourselves, with images of fertilizer and old fig trees. Ultimately we are being asked if we are like that fig tree. Are we bearing fruit or just taking up space?

And this is what has had me living with and pondering more deeply the question of what the thread is for me. The thread that I follow that I cannot always explain. The thread that challenges and empowers to bear fruit in the world. The thread that I work to cultivate and aerate not from a place of scarcity or fear, but from a place of abundance. The thread that I have clung to in the best of times and in the worst of times.

Finally, the past few Sunday afternoons have found me engaged with a group of Stanford freshmen who have voluntarily signed up for a pilot program called

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Reflections. Last week, we all participated in an exercise together that had us delineate the values – or otherwise threads – that are foundational to who we are and how we make our way through the world, at Stanford and beyond.

They are the roots that ground us and nourish us, no matter what. And in the stressful 8th week of a quarter, it seemed a timely discussion. What emerged were words like compassion, courage, authenticity, gratitude, balance, community, family, equality, fairness, faith, hope, empathy and many more.

So I will ask you again. What would you write? What is the thread that you follow and will not let go? Does it help you bear fruit in this world? Does it draw you toward God, divine mystery, what is holy? Does it bring you life?

Writer E.B White has given me an idea by which to aim to live and to hold on to the thread:

I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.

For me, it's not an either or but a way in which I hope I can do a little bit of both each day. I think it can make Lent and life a bit more counter-intuitive. And that's really good.