

Ash Wednesday 2017 - Psalm 103
St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ

Turning and Returning to Love

Ashes - Dust - Stardust - Galaxies - Spirals - Turning - Returning

Recently I've been pondering the non-linear nature of experiences. I've been thinking about experiences as being multi-faceted; that we have the capacity to approach experiences from multiple vantage points; and that experiences themselves can have multi-dimensional characteristics that impact our lives in a variety of ways. For example, something happens. The thing that happens is both about you and not about you, and then there is the thing itself. It's kind of like Augustine's explanation about the Trinity: there is the one who loves, the one who is loved and love itself.

I'd like to invite us to consider for a moment a topic that is seemingly less significant than love. Let's say there is an incident called "A," that at first glance involves just two people, and different people react to incident "A" in different ways.

There is a confrontation and feelings are hurt that need to be repaired - at least from a Christian perspective of practicing forgiveness and reconciliation. If we imagine that the incident is a point in time and we encounter it in our memories, and every time we relate to that person, we might imagine our lives encountering incident "A" at various points in time.

Kind of like a planet orbiting the sun, new light is shed on the incident so that we have an opportunity to see it in a new way; we have an opportunity to transform our relationship with the incident and the other people involved, and ourselves. There are multiple opportunities to move from initial frustration, anger and hurt toward forgiveness; toward letting go and moving on toward reconciliation. Over time incident "A" is not as important as it once seemed. You let by-gones be by-gones and get on with life. And then, out of the blue a new opportunity arises that reconnects you with incident "A" and transports you beyond the wounds of the past into an unexpected space of resurrection and new life.

Through the gifts of forgiveness, reconciliation, and time, incident "A" has been transformed into an Easter moment; a time for appreciation, thanksgiving and celebration! Incident "A" has been reshaped into a gift filled with Divine grace, and we are reconnected with our true selves - we return to being Love - by Love and with Love and in Love - life is transformed and resurrected into something amazingly new and beautiful beyond anything we could possibly have imagined into being.

Instead of continuing to imagine a hypothetical incident "A," I'm going to share a specific situation that connects the sacred with the mundane. First of all, I have a confession to make. My article that is in the March issue of The Evangelist was written about four years ago. Due to a breakdown in

communication, the article was never published, and I've always wondered if it ever would be. The article itself is not earth shattering, but my encounter with it yesterday was an Easter moment filled with grace and joy.

I initially wrote the article when I was in seminary amidst a very busy schedule of classes, a mountain load of reading, and multiple term papers. I set aside some time to write the article and put some thought and effort into writing it. I submitted my article on time to the two people I thought were responsible for publishing the newsletter, and then got on with my class assignments. On the night that the newsletter was published, I got an email from the volunteer editor apologizing that my article somehow didn't get into the newsletter and that she would be happy to include it in next month's issue. So my article about journeying through Lent could be published during Easter. Somehow that didn't make sense to me. Prior to seminary, I worked for a major engineering firm publishing proposals, and if I found something wrong or missing I would fix it if I had to stay up late into the night, even if it was someone else's mistake. My shock at how the situation was handled led to frustration and anger and self-righteous indignation that could have rapidly devolved into a downward spiral.

I later spoke with one of my parish field education supervisors about the situation to try to understand what happened and prevent it from happening again in the future. Over time I let go of my anger and resentment,

but what stayed with me was my reaction to the situation. The situation was not about me, but my reaction was. After much reflection, I could see that my intense emotions were all about my ego and my being right and my wanting things to be a certain way. But that's not the end of the story. Fast forward a few years and here I am in Sedona after a few days of clergy retreat at beautiful Chapel Rock, and I come back with allergies that turn into laryngitis. My head is congested and I'm tired and can't think straight. And Shirley needs my article for The Evangelist. So I scroll through my articles from the last few years to try to spark some new ideas. And lo, and behold, there is the Lenten article I wrote a few years ago ready to submit and finally be published. I am so delighted, I could get up and dance, except I dare not try that because sinus congestion has impacted my sense of balance.

Instead I bask in God's grace and offer thanks not just that I now have time to take care of a multitude of other Lenten tasks, but that God gave me a precious gift that was several years in the making; the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation transformed into resurrection and new life. A Lenten moment was turned into an Easter moment through the surprising gift of God's amazing grace.

It is our Christian hope that life's Lenten experiences are transformed into Easter joy, or as Walter Brueggemann writes, that God comes among us to Easter our Wednesdays - and not just during church-prescribed liturgical

seasons of the year. Every day we are invited to turn and re/turn to love by submitting our ashen ways to God. To work through the pain and suffering and sin of our fragile and broken lives, and return to the Table for nourishment from Christ's Body to the Body of Christ. To live into the hope of resurrection joy, from Wednesdays to Sundays, and Sundays to Wednesdays. And to celebrate life with the remembrance that you are from God and to God you shall return.

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