

Sermon: "Choosing Resurrection"

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Easter Sunday, April 8, 2007

First Reading: - Luke 23: 39-43

One of the criminals hanging in crucifixion railed at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Then save yourself and us."

But the other one rebuked him: "Have you no fear of God, seeing you are under the same sentence? We deserve it, after all. We are only paying the price for what we've done, but this man has done nothing wrong." He then said, "Jesus, remember me when you enter upon your kingdom." And Jesus replied, "I assure you today you will be with me in paradise."

Second Reading: — "An Athlete of God" by Martha Graham

I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live by practicing living, the principles are the same. In each, it is the performance of a dedicated precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which comes shape of achievement, a sense of one's being, a satisfaction of spirit. One becomes, in some area, an athlete of God.

Practice means to perform, over and over again in the face of all obstacles, some act of vision, of faith, of desire.

I think the reason dance has held such an ageless magic for the world is that it has been the symbol of the performance of living. The instrument through which the dance speaks is also the instrument through which life is lived: the human body. It is the instrument which holds in its memory all matters of life and death and love.

Dancing appears glamorous, easy, delightful. But the path to the paradise of that achievement is not easier than any other. There is fatigue so great that the body cries, even in its sleep. There are times of complete frustration; there are daily small deaths. It takes about 10 years to make a mature dancer. The training is twofold. There is the study and practice of the craft in order to strengthen the muscular structure of the body. The body is shaped, disciplined, honored and in time, trusted. The movement becomes clean, precise, eloquent, truthful. Movement never lies. It is a barometer telling the state of the soul's weather to all who can read it. The legends of the soul's journey are retold with all their gaiety and their tragedy and the bitterness and sweetness of living. And there is grace. I mean the grace resulting from faith: faith in life, in love, in people and in the act of dancing.

In a dancer there is a reverence for such forgotten things as the miracle of the small beautiful bones and their delicate strength. In a thinker there is a reverence for the beauty of the alert and directed and lucid mind. In all of us who perform there is an awareness of the smile which is part of the equipment, or gift, of the acrobat. We have all walked the high wire of circumstance at times. We recognize the gravity pull of the earth as the acrobat does. The smile is there because he is practicing living at that instant of danger. He does not choose to fall.

lyrics to “Lord of the Dance” by Sydney Carter

I danced in the morning when the world was begun
I danced in the Moon and the Stars and the Sun
I came down from Heaven and I danced on Earth
At Bethlehem I had my birth:

*Dance then, wherever you may be
I am the Lord of the Dance, said He!
And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be
And I'll lead you all in the Dance, said He!*

I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black
It's hard to dance with the devil on your back
They buried my body and they thought I'd gone
But I am the Dance and I still go on.

They cut me down and I leapt up high
I am the Life that'll never, never die.
I'll live in you if you'll live in Me -
I am the Lord of the Dance, said He.

Sermon: “Choosing Resurrection”

As far as I can determine, an early religious liberal (someone who lived in the first century after Jesus lived) snuck into the home of whoever was copying the final version of the gospels and did a “Unitarian edit” on the story of the crucifixion in Luke. Here is my “midrash”, my commentary on that passage.

The religious conservatives and fundamentalists at that time were all declaring that what counted was faith: what mattered was that Jesus was the Messiah; what counted was the belief that he was your personal savior; what mattered was the willingness of the Christians to partake in certain prescribed rituals of baptism, communion and church membership in order to reap the benefits of eternal salvation.

The way I picture it, this unknown and stealthy Unitarian quietly pasted in the story of the thieves on the cross and then made a swift retreat. And he or she got away with it! It was written into the sacred text. You don't believe me?

Look at it! The first thief asks Jesus, “Aren't you the Messiah?” (Here is a criminal who apparently believed the stories he heard.) Then that thief added, “I believe you have the power to save yourself and to save us – so do it!” Not only does this thief believe that Jesus is the “promised one,” he also believes in his supernatural powers and that Jesus will be his personal savior. The first thief thinks that Jesus has all the power that a savior would have, and eagerly looks forward to the rabbi using it on his behalf.

The second thief is a humanist – honest, straight-forward, enormously concerned with how human beings treat one another. Even though the second thief is undergoing the same painful crucifixion as Jesus is, the first thing he does is to attempt to protect Jesus from the loud mouth on the other cross. This is an amazing relationship to take to Jesus of Nazareth. Not, “Will you save me?” But, “Allow me to help you.” This second thief seems to be saying, “Whenever I see another innocent human-being being harassed and/or mocked and/or criticized, I will ask the accuser to

reconsider. “Are you not in awe, at least of God? We are all under the same sentence of death.” (A sentence that is no longer abstract or far away, but right now.) And then the second thief says something even more remarkable. He says, “This agonizing death I am now undergoing, I deserved it.” And he says to the other thief, “So did you.” This is a criminal who takes responsibility for his actions and makes no pretense of innocence or injustice or victimization. He recites the law of karma, “We all have to pay the price for what we have done.” And then what he says about Jesus is so simple, so truthful, so self-evident. “This man has done nothing wrong.” Human beings: we are usually able to recognize right and wrong— good and evil – innocence and blame. And the criminal says to another human being, “I’m not good, but I can see that you are.”

So what does a “not good” criminal ask from Jesus? He doesn’t ask for eternal life or salvation or the forgiveness of his sins. He doesn’t ask for another few good years on earth, or for a miracle, or for a painless death. He asks for something natural and human and seemingly small. He says, “Jesus, remember me when you enter into your kingdom.” Remember me. May some of the love that I see in your eyes take in the mystery of my existence. May some of whom I have been live on in who you are.

Jesus’ reply is that of a Universalist. “I assure you (you don’t have to worry) today you will be with me in paradise.” Not in three days, not after some time in hell or purgatory “today you will be with me in paradise.”

I can’t help but think that at that very moment the thief was in paradise. Despite the cross, the pain and his criminal past, he had just found out that there was a kind of holy love that would not forget him, and that would take him as far as he wanted to go.

This story in Luke is not about the supernatural or about miracles or about accepting Jesus as your personal savior. It is about what it means to be a human being and the awesome power of love and remembrance. It is about paradise being possible today.

If you need a visual, look at the lilies assembled at the front of the church. Most of them have been given in memory of people who once lived and who are no longer with us. Some have been given in memory of those who are still very much alive and are not forgotten, like young, 16-year-old Andrew who is fighting leukemia. What I love about lilies in general (and Easter lilies in particular) is that they look like trumpets. And what I hear them trumpeting is, “You have been loved and you are remembered.” “I have lived and I remember.” “Love is stronger than Death.” “The promise of spring and new life are real.” And, “Yes, the darkness has come close and the suffering and the cruelty have been terrible, but Easter is also real.” And the dance goes on . . .

If the lilies don’t speak to you, then look in your own heart. Think of whom you remember. Consider those friends and family who no matter how far they wander, into whatever kingdoms they go to, you will not forget them. Because you have broken bread together. Because you have blessed one another. Because you have encouraged and cared for and loved one another. That love is so persistent that it may “go on forever.” That love is stronger than death.

On Easter morning we choose to remember that kind of love. Together we turn in the direction of a rising sun. We sing the Hallelujah Chorus and we wear a new hat and we might carry home a fragrant lily. And hope that it doesn’t freeze on the way to the car. You see, the problem is that the Easter celebration (as well as the Passover celebration, a story of liberation and hope and freedom) ??? all these narratives occur in the same old complicated world.

Today, a time of great promise and great disappointment, a time when we remember miraculous goodness, but are also haunted by memories of terrible cruelty and harsh circumstances. We remember not only great blessings, but also great loss. Today, like everyday, we must choose, “In what direction shall I face?” Where will I put my attention? What is my ultimate goal while I am on earth?

Martha Graham offers a wonderful metaphor concerning that choice. She claims that the athletic, aerobic, trained professional dancer lives fully even at the moment of danger and “chooses not to fall.” Now all of us know (and Martha Graham admits) that dancers fall all the time. What does she mean by that phrase? She acknowledges that dancers suffer from exhaustion, injury and frustration. She puts it in even stronger terms. “Mature dancers after 10 relentless years of training . . . suffer small deaths on a daily basis.”

The way she describes the life of the body, I would hope someday to describe the life of the spirit, not in the brevity of a 10-year training period, but over a lifetime. The spirit is “shaped, disciplined, honed and in time, trusted.” In your interactions with all other children of God you will become clean, precise, eloquent and truthful. You will walk on the high wire because there is no other place to walk. You will acknowledge the pull of gravity and continue to practice living in full awareness of constant danger. As we walk on that tightrope we will do two things: 1) we will smile, and 2) we will not fall. And all would be well except for the fact that I, like many of you, am not an athlete for God. I wish I were. I pray that someday I might be. But despite years of work and meditation and sobriety, panic and distraction move in quickly.

I have been reading Anne Lamott’s new book, *Grace, Eventually*. She claims that according to her sponsor in AA, for every year you’ve been sober you get one second before the panic crushes you. She’s been sober 20 years – thus when faced with a problem, a crisis, an irrational situation she doesn’t panic for 20 seconds. I would like to extend this particular warranty to one second for every year you’ve been attending First Unitarian, for every year you’ve followed a meditation practice, for every year you’ve been in therapy: one second per year.

What happens when you lose your focus? Lose your balance? Lose your faith? I read from Ms. Lamott:

“The lunatic employees of the Swing Shift take over. This is the committee inside me that is sometimes dumb and dangerous with bad judgment, and often obsessed with thoughts of personal greatness or impending doom. Like, for instance, the unbearable truth that all the people you love most will die, maybe in painful circumstances, and soon, probably sometime next week.”

Anne Lamott confesses that she is not a good dancer, let alone a great dancer. She is not an athlete for God. But she does volunteer to dance with some developmentally disabled adults in her neighborhood. They have Down Syndrome. They are mentally disabled. They are autistic people living together in a group home. And in the awkward movements of the damaged residents as they attempt to dance, to twirl, to respond to the rhythm of the music she recognizes her own life:

“I noticed all sorts of parallels: the off-rhythm gait, the language you can’t quite catch, the lack of coordination, the odd effects—too friendly or too far away—the bad teeth, the screwed-up relationships or no relationships at all, the not-fitting-in-ness. It’s incredibly touching when someone who seems so hopeless finds a few inches of light to stand in and makes everything work as well as possible. All of us lurch and fall, sit in the dirt, are helped to our feet, keep moving, feel like idiots, lose our balance, gain it, help others get back on their feet, and keep going.”

Allow me to repeat: “All of us lurch and fall, sit in the dirt, and are helped to our feet, keep moving, feel like idiots, lose our balance, gain it, help others get back on their feet, and keep going.”

We keep going. I am fond of quoting Lao Tzo, who when asked to say in one sentence what the Tao was, replied, “Walk on.”

That I believe is the dance of Easter, where you occasionally move with grace and eloquence as a professional mature dancer in one of Martha Graham's Dance Company productions. But more likely you (like the rest of us) find only a few inches of light to stand on.

To choose resurrection is to choose not to fall. And when we fall, as all dancers do, to choose to get up again and to help others to get back on their feet. As people who have loved and have been loved, we keep moving in the direction of joy and possibility and truth. Personally, I think it is a good idea to remember that life is always performed on a tight wire with gravity always pulling at us. On this unlikely platform we are called to smile with the persistence of a focused acrobat who practices living in the face of danger. Together with the openness of the heart of a Down Syndrome young man all of us are invited out onto the dance floor. We agree to sing, to rejoice, to move forward.

Knowing that paradise is possible today – for thieves, for acrobats, for thee and for me. Again we choose to join the happy chorus that the morning stars began. Choosing to remember, the triumphant song of life.