

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in your sight,  
O God my strength and my redeemer.

*When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.*

As our society evolves it becomes fascinating to watch the changing interaction between the Church and society at large. Each has its own language, values, images and understandings. Sometimes the gap between these worlds has amusing misunderstandings. Take, for instance, the letter I just received from a financial institution where I have some invested funds. They wanted me check the information they had on file to see if it was correct. So I looked at the address: check; phone number: check; profession: um, I was startled to learn what they thought I did for a living. Under the category "profession" was written, and let me spell it for you: P-A-S-T-U-R-E. Yes! If any of you find the inexplicable need to graze anytime soon, please call the office for an appointment.

Now, exploring the gap between these two worlds from the other direction: I remember being so compellingly struck by one man's painful and yet victorious narrative. For thirty years he had faced a devastating family situation. For thirty years he worked to come to peace with it. He told me how he went to a support group for people who were victims of similar circumstances and that he was struck by the vast multiplicity of responses of how others dealt with their pain. Some of those responses might be frowned upon, even condemned by society, and particularly by the Church. Yet he told me that his emotional pain had taught him not to judge. He had learned that sometimes we must stand in the gap between others' expectations and the reality of our individual situations. Looking me dead in the eye, he told me we cannot wear other people's skins, cannot know their pain, cannot presume to know for them how best to respond to their circumstances, never mind judge them for their behavior. I must also say that this man exudes an integrity and a peace that I have seen in few others. I am humbled simply to know him.

*<sup>2</sup>And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup>They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?'*

Another story that has always followed me was that of a homeless man. This was during the recession of the early 1990's and he had called the church asking for help. I went to meet him at a local Burger King and the person I met was not what I was expecting. In fact, even though he had quite accurately described himself and what he was wearing so that I could identify him, I had trouble "seeing" him because he was not what I was expecting to "see". The man was in his mid- to late fifties, with an air of competence, confidence and deep integrity. In a story that I believed then and believe now, he explained how he had been in middle management all his life, had worked hard, and then, after more than thirty years with the same company, the only company he had ever worked for, he was laid off in a huge purge of staff. He could not find work, and he lost everything: house, car, possessions, wife. A veteran of the Vietnam War, he was trying to get to a VA hospital south of us. As it was late in the day he was hoping I would pay for a meal and a motel room. I did both. After I gave him some cash he told me that he had

just had a conversation with another minister. This minister had told him he was just scum, a parasite on society. I will never forget this man: the way he looked me dead in the eye, the way he carried himself with integrity, the way he refused to apologize for what he was asking for, the way he stood in the gap between others' judgment of him and his own insistence on maintaining his integrity. Looking at the cash, and then looking at me in the eye, he simply said, "Thank you."

*<sup>4</sup>When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.*

There is a compelling quality to these stories of people standing in the gap: refusing to be victims, refusing to stay in a tomb, refusing to allow circumstances to define their lives, but rather insisting that their lives will define the meaning of the circumstance. Both of these men could have responded very differently to their difficulties; they could have thrashed and struck out in their pain because they saw no way out. We have all seen this too many times. I remember once speaking with an elderly man who was contemplating suicide because he could no longer provide for his family: his wife of 50 years was in hospice and in they were in danger of being put on the street because he could not pay their rent because his income was going toward her pain medications. In his shame and emotional and spiritual agony he wondered if suicide was the only viable way out.

Parker Palmer once wrote that violence arises when we do not know what else to do with our suffering.<sup>1</sup> Violence arises when we do not know what else to do with our suffering. As we all know from personal experience, there is a great deal of truth in that statement, particularly when we consider the fact that violence occurs not only physically, but emotionally, psychologically and even spiritually as well. And the challenge that we all face is how to let our lives shape our adverse circumstances, and not vice-versa, how to respond NOT with the reactive fight or flight mechanism that is hard wired into us at birth, but with our responsive hearts—a discipline that we learn through practice and resolve, humility and grace, forgiveness and confession.

This is, of course, what you expect a minister to say, particularly on Easter Sunday. Yet I stand before you this day not so much as a minister, but as a fellow disciple, someone no different from anyone here: a cauldron of experience and circumstance, learned behaviors and instinctive reactions, trying to find a way that invites me to shape my own self into the incarnational image of God. Am I defined by my circumstances, or by my response to them? Do I look like my dents, with the impression of what banged me stamped on my visage to the world? Or do I look like a person created in the image of God?

*<sup>5</sup>As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup>But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.'*

In late March I received my weekly e-newsletter from the Alban Institute which I forwarded to many of you (and if you would like to be on that weekly distribution list, let me

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<sup>1</sup> Parker Palmer; *Standing in the Tragic Gap*; Weavings, Volume XXIV, Number 2; March/April 2009; page 9.

know). The author was quoting a woman who was commenting on her commitment to raise her children outside the church. She explained, "What intelligent person would possibly look to the church as a moral compass these days?"<sup>2</sup>

*'[Y]ou are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.'*

Perhaps the Church is indeed the wrong place to look; we all know the stories; the Church's battered image all too often bears the resemblance of the sin that dented it, and too seldom the impression of the One who created it; too often it is defined by its circumstances, rather than its responses to them. Yet as I reflected on this woman's all too justified comment I found myself drawn to the key stories of scripture, those master stories that we all remember, those compelling narratives that shape the church's true image despite its failures and shortcomings and loss of moral compass. And what I realized in the context of my thoughts was that these master stories are so . . . *cruciform*—that is the image that is most deeply impressed in them and on the Church. That is, these stories reach upward toward love's source—God in Christ, and outward toward love's object—you and me and everyone in between. These stories reach to God's responsive heart lying slain in stone tomb, and they witness to that heart as that very death chamber becomes a womb of life and love and all that is in between. These stories are our stories; they are us at our core of identity and experience: Created in the image of God. The Garden of Eden. The Burning Bush. Standing for justice against Pharaoh. The Ten Commandments. The Twenty Third Psalm. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. The courage of Mary. The song of the angels. Peace on earth goodwill to all people. Lying in a manger. The Beatitudes. Healing the sick. Loving the outcast. The Prodigal Son. The Great Commandment. The Great Judgment. The Golden Rule. The Good Samaritan. Paul's Hymn of love. God is love. A new heaven and a new earth. Crucifixion—a violent reaction from the broken heart of humanity . . . and resurrection—a loving response from the broken heart of God.

*'[Y]ou are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.'*

Broken hearts. There is an old Hassidic tale of a student who asks the rabbi, "Teacher, why does the Torah say, 'place these words upon your hearts'? Why does it not tell us to place these words *in* our hearts?" And the rabbi responds, "It is because, as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in." Sufi master Hazrat Inayat Khan said much the same thing: "God breaks the heart again and again and again until it stays open."

The way of Christ—the way of keeping the heart open—is, in its own way, quite simple. But never, ever, ever make the mistake of thinking it is easy. As G.K. Chesterton once said, "Christianity has not been tried and found lacking. It has been found difficult and left untried." And it is difficult because it demands that our hearts be willing to be broken and yet to stay open as Mary's, to be wounded and yet forgive as the prodigal father, to be fearful and yet face Pharaoh with the courage of Moses, to give all we have yet live in abundance as the impoverished widow, to fail miserably and yet try again as Peter, to proclaim life and yet die as

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<sup>2</sup> Cassandra D. Carkuff Williams, *Moments of Authentic Discipleship*; The Alban Weekly; Issue 243, March 29, 2009; page 1.

Jesus, to walk the wrong path, and yet turn around as Paul. It is to love in and into the cruciform way of life, and to resolve that we will be part of the world's needed healing and not part of its continued wounding. It is to stand in the gap between a world that glorifies power and violence and in response to proclaim a message that is perceived as weakness and to walk a Way that is understood to be unrealistic. Christianity has not been tried and found lacking. It has been found difficult and left untried.

*<sup>7</sup>But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' <sup>8</sup>So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

If we are to be a church where no one will look at us and see the impression of what has dented us but rather the image of the one who called us, then we must be willing to stand in the gap: to stand in the gap between the world's violent reaction to its pain and God's loving response to that same pain. We must be willing to stand in the gap between fundamentalist beliefs that violently condemn others as wrong and a faith of light and love that teaches that the Way of Christ is more about behavior and less about creeds. We must be willing to stand in the gap between a world that glorifies the tomb of shock and awe and the God that offers the womb of grace and awe. We must be willing to stand in the gap between our own fear-based reactions and our faith-based responses, and have the courage to be, and to choose, and to walk with Christ and all faithful pilgrims who choose life over death, love over fear, generosity over scarcity. The Christian Church must ever be willing to stand in the gap between the ways and values of the world, and the Way and Value of Life.

*'[Y]ou are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.*

During your prayer time this week I ask you to do two things. First, think of a time when you have not allowed painful circumstances to define your life, but instead when have used your life to define your circumstances. Think of a time when you bore not the impression of the pain, but rather the image of your response of love. Think of a time you stood in the gap, at that place where the vertical and horizontal beams of the cross intersect, and responded from the heart of God in you. Give thanks for your own witness.

Second, think of a time when the Church has not allowed painful circumstances to define its life, but instead has used its life to define its circumstances. Think of a time when it bore not the impression of the pain, but rather the image of its response of love. Think of a time when it stood in the gap, at that place where the vertical and horizontal beams of the cross intersect, and responded from the heart of God. Give thanks for your own witness. For the Church is not the building, the Church is not the clergy and staff, the Church is not even its programs however worthy they are. The Church is the community, the beloved incarnate community that bears the imprint of the One who is the Way and the resurrection and the life.

*'Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.'*

Amen and amen.

Glory be to you, O Creating God, who creates life out of the Deep: Out of void and chaos, you call forth cosmos.

Glory be to you, O Creating God, for speaking the Word that was in the beginning.

Glory be to you, Jesus of Nazareth, that in obedience you lived and died a human being among humanity, teaching us power in surrender, showing us light in darkness.

Glory be to you, O Risen Christ, that in accepting total death you burst the bonds of death, shattering its power for all time, beyond all time.

Glory be to you, O Holy Spirit, who comforted us in the dark night of Lent and now draws us closer to you, rejoicing in the sunlight of Easter. Amen.