

February 5, 2012

Presentation of Christ in the Temple - Candlemas

Malachi 3:1-4

Hebrews 2:14-18

Luke 2:22-40

□ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

An African folktale. There was a great king. He ruled over several villages. One day the king received an urgent message from the chief of one of his villages. The chief's son, a young man, had been killed during a hunt. The son had been deeply loved by his family and by everyone in the village. The chief asked the king to come and be with them in their mourning. The king sent lots of fine foods and money to the grieving villagers so they could have an grand, spectacular funeral, but the king didn't go.

Some years later, the king's wife died. He had loved her very much. He sent word out to his villages inviting them to come to the funeral. The chief and his village recalled how the king had responded to their grief and what seemed important to him. They gathered together their best food and their prized treasures and sent them to the king, but the people didn't go to the funeral. The king realized that he had all this great food and wealth, but it wasn't what he needed. He needed people to be with him in his grief, in his emptiness.

The story offers wisdom about where we receive true comfort and strength. As I understand it, a Sudanese man got up and told that story in church when his bishop visited. The bishop had sent lots of money to support the congregation, but had found it difficult to come and be with them.

The person who told me this story compared it President Bush flying over New Orleans after Katrina. I well remember the image of the solitary President looking out his airplane window and seeing people on rooftops. It was among the lowest points of his presidency. Compare it to one of the highest points of his presidency, the day soon after 9/11 when he went to Ground Zero. While he spoke to people with a megaphone, he had his arm around a fireman. He went and embraced people in their pain and loss and confusion. One image says, "I'm with you." The other, "I'm not with you."

When I saw that picture of President Bush looking out over New Orleans, I felt sorrow for him. I was empathetic. I've have those moments too when I've been more detached than I really want to be.

A year ago, I spent five intense days at a residential conference studying leadership and group behavior. Toward the end, each of us was assigned to draw a picture of what had happened during our time together, and in the picture I drew the vantage point was aerial; I drew the conference as if I were looking down at it, as if in an airplane and looking at the ground.

We shared our drawings with each other and discussed them in small groups, and someone told me, "Lane, your picture shows how I've experienced you during the conference, making interesting observation, but kind of above it all and not really with us on the ground, fully in

the mix.” Now, I had felt emotionally engaged during that week and wanted to be on the ground, but at least one person had experienced me as detached.

I was grateful for her courage to be honest with me, and it helped me to see that, I – like every human being – have a deep ambivalence about drawing close to other people as well as drawing close to God and to myself, to really “know thyself” as the ancient Greeks put it. When we look inside ourselves, we may notice conflicting motivations. We fear being too committed, losing our individuality, our freedom, and we also fear be alone, cut off, unconnected. We want to be safe, invulnerable, strong, and we want to be close and connected to other people.

More and more, I understand one of the principal tasks of human existence is developing our capacity for intimacy. It’s an essential part of spiritual growth – what it looks like. The word “intimacy” comes from the same Latin root as the word “intestine.” It’s about being close, in our gut, with ourselves, with others, with God.

Intimacy is necessary if we are going to satisfy our desire to belong, to be connected. It requires vulnerability, and candor, and conversation, and compassion, and understanding, and give and take. It’s learning to enjoy other people and to trust other people. It’s learning to be kind and forgiving to other people and to ourselves. It’s learning to allow mistakes. It is a slow and sometimes painful process.

Look at the whole scope of the Bible. It’s a story of God and humanity gradually becoming closer. Think of the story of Jesus. It’s all about God drawing close to us. Think of the Eucharist: it’s God in us, God in our gut, the risen, eternal life of Jesus in us here and now.

We might also notice that coming close requires reciprocity, give and take – Jesus comes closer to us if we accept him. He doesn’t just come and impose himself on us. Mary had to risk and say, “Yes.” We have to take a risk and allow him into our lives. Mary and Joseph had to love their son, sacrifice for him, nurture him... lots of giving as well as lots of receiving. Any healthy relationship – with God or with another person – there has to be giving and receiving.

During Christmas we celebrate God coming to be with us. We celebrate light coming into the world. We blessed candles today as the Christmas cycle comes to an end. In Italy, today’s feast is the last day for the Christmas crèche. Today we celebrate God entering the community, belonging to the community. Luke shows the Holy Family participating in two rites: presenting Jesus, their first born son, dedicating him to God, and Luke mentions the ritual purifying of his mother. The Holy Family’s participation in these rites shows that they belong to Israel, that they are part of God’s people.

Today’s feast also looks forward to the expansion of God’s people. Simeon says that God’s life is for all people, that in Jesus God’s light will go out to the Gentiles. Simeon is picking up on a theme from Isaiah and Israel’s tradition that God will embrace all nations, that all peoples belong together with God. Today’s feast is about community building: Jesus being part of the community, his identity partially shaped by the community, and it’s looking forward to Jesus expanding the community by embracing everyone.

Over the last month, many of our vestry members have been visiting other vital, non-Episcopal churches in the DC area. It’s been hugely positive spiritual experience for me, as

much learning about myself as about other Christians and other churches. It's an experience sort of like travel, leaving our normal environment teaches us so much about who we are.

I've attend three services at two great churches, and I chatted with people afterward asking why they came there, and almost always the first, and if not the first the second, reason people gave me was community. They felt accepted and honored, that they belonged. It confirmed to me again that the greatest human need is love and that one of the most important ways we experience God in our gut is through other people.

The possibility for community was one of the first positive things that stuck me about the church. I grew up never going to church, hostile to the church, but one of the first positive experiences I had of church was in college. Over the course of a month, I had the sad coincidence of going to three funerals. I think that I'd only been to two or three funerals in all my life until that month when I attended the funerals of three young people about my age.

In today's gospel, Simeon tells Mary, "A sword will pierce your soul." He's referring to Jesus' death and Mary's pain, her future loss of her son. At those three funerals, there were three sets of family and friends with pierced souls, and I witnessed and felt the strength hurting people receive from being together, from community. The attractiveness of Christian community made a strong impression upon me. It made me think: how do I relate to eternity and to the big questions of life? Where can I receive that kind of support and strength, have that sense of belonging?

Last Sunday Fr Randy told us that relationships are the only thing that matter. It's something I've learned here. I think that it's a way we've grown together as a community, a way the Holy Spirit has worked in us and transformed us.

Jesus annoyed a lot of people. Jesus often didn't do what people wanted him to do. He sometimes went off to be alone for periods. But Jesus created community. Jesus attracted people by loving them, loving people whether or not they were disciples. He was a friend of sinners, of the ignored, of the despised. He sought out and loved those who were lost.

To Jesus, welcoming and belonging was more important than believing. Frequently, his own disciples didn't believe him or trust him. But Jesus loved them. Today Jesus enters a community, and he will expand community by loving. He shows us how to draw close: loving God, loving each other, loving the newcomer, loving the stranger, loving those who feel beyond God's embrace.

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