

Open Prairie, UCC
December 10, 2006
Rev. Curran Reichert

A Voice Crying Out in the Wilderness

This past Friday night Katie and I were invited to the Lorimer family home in Naperville for dinner and to decorate their Christmas tree. The Lorimer's are Katie's parishioners; they are a delightful family of four the littlest of whom is named Nell. Yes, Nell as in the Christmas song;

Bobby wants a pair of skates,
Suzy wants a sled
Nellie wants a picture book,
yellow, blue, and red
Now I think I'll leave to you
what to give the rest
Choose for me, dear Santa Claus;
you will know the best.

And Nell... does not disappoint, she is exactly as the name suggests; four years old, she comes complete with enormous brown eyes, two black pony tails that perch atop her head like a bird that has lost it's way and a delirious giggle that is at once ear shattering and completely disarming. When Nell crawled up to sit beside me and snuggled in close to help me untangle the ornament hooks, I thought I might cry. Just being in the presence of this little person would melt even the coldest heart, until of course it came time to put her to bed. Then I was glad it was her parent's job and not mine- she's a handful!

I know I am not alone here, I have seen what happens to all of you when Kiley or little Heather come to church. Those children will never have to wonder if they are loved, we pass them around like bouncing balls of joy. But why are we so mesmerized by children? It is because every child born is a shining example of human wholeness and we do not expect a child to be anything other than what it is. A child is a pooping, peeing, nursing, crying, laughing, picture of perfection. We love being around children because they remind us of the essence of humanity. Being around children begs the question whether we ask it out loud or silently, “What happened to me?” If children represent human wholeness, and I was once a child, then I was also once whole. What happened to make me feel so discombobulated? What happened? Life happened.

To be whole is to be authentic...100% authentic- babies and children are 100% authentic they can't help it. So, if we all start out that way and most of us don't feel that way now, that means somewhere along the road we learned that it was not safe to be 100% authentic. We learned that certain parts of us would be received and other parts would be rejected. I suspect what happens is that we learn to preempt the process, rather than continue to test the waters... to see which parts society will accept or reject, at some point **we** start rejecting the parts of ourselves that feel most vulnerable. Call this the self-editor or editrix, the annihilator, whatever you call it...it is that tiny voice in our heads that nags at us and says, “don't do or say that- people will laugh at you...people will make fun of or reject you. People will think you are 'different!'”

Why do you think Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer is an enduring classic? Because we all know what it feels like to be told we have to trade in our shiny red noses for the more commonly accepted brown version, and so begins the distancing between our actual and perceived or perceivable selves.

We are taught or we teach ourselves to divide our hearts between what **is** (the true self) and what **should be** (the self that is acceptable to others). What we used to say we **believed**, we now must say we **think**...because believing in something leaves a trail of vulnerability which points right to the heart, and we must disguise that trail so that no one will be able to find our hearts and break them. Protect and defend yourselves well the experts tell us- never let the enemy know what you're thinking, don't wear your heart on your sleeve; crying is a sign of weakness. What those experts don't tell us is, that the pain of living a divided life is far worse than the pain of living a **feeling** or **authentic** one. Over time the body and spirit really can't abide being in the world as someone other than who we really are. Fractures of the body, mind and soul, eventually cause us to crack or as is more often the case, to slowly self-destruct.

This morning we hear from John the Baptizer, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" What does this text speak to, if not the need for integration?

If the last two weeks have been about understanding that the Kin(g)dom of God is **now**...that **this** is the time to become who we mean to be, then this morning's text offers guidelines for how to do exactly that. Make straight the crooked pathways, smooth out the rough spots; make a way to receive God in the form of a what ...
A child.

The voice cries out in the wilderness, "remember who you were at your birth," our hearts respond, "help us to remember." The voice cries out in the wilderness, "let God make you whole again," and although we want nothing more... somehow, every fiber in our beings bristles in resistance. Deep down inside we fear that can't remember what wholeness feels like...we have spent so much of our lives compartmentalizing, taking care of others, going to extreme measures to prevent ourselves from hurting others or being hurt, what if we can't do what you are asking of us John?

If really do prepare to look into the face of the newborn Christ child and remember that we are meant to be whole, authentic beings...we might have to examine our career paths, our relationships, our families, things would have to change significantly and we're not sure we're ready for all that. Still, the wild-eyed prophet stares back at us with an unshakable appetite for the truth and demands an answer...if not now, when?

If we listen to John, we hear that we cannot get to integration without going through a period of acknowledging what has been fractured. Imagine that, another way of looking at salvation...call it **integration or even desegregation**. Parker Palmer uses the example of Rosa Parks, he says, “eventually the inner self will insist on sitting down at the front of the buses of our lives.” We have been talking for the last couple of weeks about the inner and the outer life matching up, this is a continuation of that conversation.

We **do not** hear God saying that we are short on what we need to become whole, and we’d better run out to the mall quick and stock up. What we **do** hear God saying is that we already have exactly what we need, we’ve had it all along, but somewhere along the way we learned to hide it instead of letting it shine.

This time of year it’s easy to get off track, we get sucked into the trap of trying to fill the void with stuff-food, presents, etc. But, haven’t we also learned over the years of trying and failing, that there is no substitution for the truth, no one size fits all key to happiness. John the Baptist is saying we have what we need, we need only to remember...the promises God made to us at our birth, the wholeness we once knew and can know again in the birth of the Christ child.

Prepare ye the way of the Lord, mend the fractures, forgive the failures, live into your authentic self, for surely all flesh is meant to see the salvation of God made known to us in the perfection of a child.

Amen

