

***True Spiritual Freedom: The Lesson of Extravagant Love***

For most of my life, I would never have considered myself a “meanderer” by nature – that is one who walks along pathways of life for the sake of the beauty of the walk. It’s not that I have been resistant to surprises popping up now and then. In truth, some of my life’s most challenging surprises have yielded more grace than I ever believed I deserved. And for those of you who have come to know me better over these last twelve months what I am about to say will probably not surprise you, either. By personality and in the context of my family system, I grew up and into a person who strove to be focused, disciplined, competitive, and always setting high expectations not only for myself but for mostly everyone else around me. I suppose, too, in being a woman, there was an inner dynamic at play, exacting a pretty high cost for being more than simply competent. I had to be better than merely competent.

I have come to understand through lots of therapy and spiritual direction that living in this limited way, exacts its own losses. For example, I believe there have been more than a few times in which I missed a lot of the God’s attempts to get my attention when so driven by goals and objectives that seemed challenging and attainable to me. The greater danger in ***only living driven in this way***, without efforts to be increasingly self-aware and self-reflective has the potential of making one judgmental, not only of others but also profoundly judgmental of oneself. Perhaps a few of you are nodding your heads in agreement because somewhere not so deeply buried in your heart are memories of how harshly judgmental you have been on yourself as well as on others.

Last week’s gospel from the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, is a perfect introductory lesson for where the Evangelist invites us to meander and immerse ourselves in the biblical texts before us today. Last week, in verse 9 we heard, “Let anyone with ears, listen!” and again, in verse 43 this week, it is repeated, “Let anyone with ears, listen!” ... So, I suggest, my friends, that we pay close attention and listen up to what the Spirit is offering us in these texts. Listen and notice... and perhaps if we dare, take it to heart.

As I prayed with the text from last week and the one before us today, I couldn’t help but notice the complete and utter extravagance of the Sower in last week’s gospel. I imagine this Sower reaching down into this large and cumbersome bag of seed and simply throwing handful after handful everywhere with no hesitation or reluctance. I imagine this Sower casting seeds without any presumptions, preconditions, biases, or judgments about which soil would be most receptive to the seed. Unlike me, who probably would have done research first and taken “samples” of the soil so as not to “waste” the seed in the first place. This Sower’s only desire is to scatter the seed as widely as possible, giving the soil every opportunity to yield a harvest, regardless of its richness, regardless of its fertility, regardless of its seeming inadequacy to receive the seed in the first place.

Oh, I can just hear myself thinking... This Sower needs to be written up... start the paperwork... teach this Sower the value of true productivity, of earnest return, of effective strategy,

of “good” judgment. Let’s get this right!. But what if the intent, what if the lesson intended by the Spirit is not about right judgment, or analyzing the potential productivity? What if the deeper meaning of this gospel is found in the good news of extravagance and abundance, not judgment and scarcity? “Let those who have ears, listen!” Oh, I can hear a little voice speaking directly to me, “Judith, you best be listening!”

Today, we are invited to the scene of yet another sower... this time, the sower in this text seems to be one a little more like me, intent on not wasting good seed after bad. This sower has some strategy going on. Good seed on good soil. Seems like a character I can relate to fairly easily... but wait a minute. There is another actor in the scene. Someone with very bad intention sneaks in and sows weeds among the good seed so when the plants grew up they were intermingled among the weeds. Who could have known? But wait, someone again, just like me enters the scene and sets about making a plan to eliminate the weeds, do away with the unwanted, unneeded, unnecessary growth that has resulted in a less than perfect and less than productive yield. Sounds not only like a reasonable approach, it sounds darn right responsible.

Yet the character truly in charge replies... “No. Do not remove the weeds for in pulling them out you will most definitely uproot and eliminate all the good that is there. All the good and the seemingly bad that can co-exist by the way, even in troubling and less than perfect circumstances.

Leave the weeds there? You have got to be joking... “No, says the One who has overseen the casting of the seeds. No, says the One who truly knows the potential of all the good that will come to harvest if left to grow as intended by the grace and extravagance of the Sower. By the mercy and compassion of the One who ultimately and only can make the final judgment of what is worthy and what is not, of who is worthy to be included, invited, respected, healed, forgiven, restored, renewed, loved and saved, we are invited to learn this lesson and apply it in our own lives.

My friends, just as Josh so clearly preached last week that at any given time, each of us contains within us the rocky, parched, resistant, if not downright thorny landscapes of our soul, the assurances of an Extravagant Sower promise unrelenting redemptive grace **for all**.

And today we also hear the appointed Psalm 139, the psalm which I refer to as “the song of my soul.” For in this psalm I am also offered the assurance that there is nothing about my wanderings, meanderings and resistance with which the Divine is not already well-aware, if not already forgiving. No matter where I try to hide, or where I try to escape, I am always found by Love. Even if “I make the grave my bed...” I am assured that in that very place of death, the Lord of Life will meet me there time and time again.

How miraculous is it that even in this most disorienting and deeply difficult time and season, we hear, if we listen, really listen, the very words we need to hear right here right now. Nowhere can we flee, nowhere can we consign ourselves, that the Divine is not already loving, forgiving, healing and renewing us. And it is simply not up to us to consign anyone else to the darkness, to the grave, or to the margins of unworthiness. ***The gift of surrendering the harsh judgments held in our hearts is true spiritual freedom whereby we, too, will become extravagant sowers of Love. That’s our only vocation.***

***The Spirit’s got this, my friends! Let anyone with ears, listen, indeed! Amen.***