

Sermon for June 17, 2018 – Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio

The Rev. Judith L. Rhodes

Learning to Walk in the Dark*

In her amazing book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and author, tells the story of Jacques Lusseyran, a blind French resistance fighter who wrote about his experience in a memoir called, *And There Was Light*. Lusseyran was not born blind, though his parents noticed he was having trouble reading and fitted him with glasses while he was still young. After a tragic accident at age 7, Jacques was completely and permanently blind.

What was so incredible about his story was that he learned from his parents that “he was not a poor blind boy but the discoverer of a new world, in which the light outside of him moved inside to show him things he might never have found any other way.”

Barbara Brown Taylor goes on to write, “Barely ten days later after his accident he made a discovery that entranced him for the rest of his life.” His own words describe this experience best, “The only way I can describe the experience is in clear and direct words. I had completely lost the sight of my eyes; I could not see the light of the world anymore. Yet the light was still there. The source was not obliterated. I felt it gushing forth every moment, brimming over; I felt how it wanted to spread out over the world. I had only to receive it... It was all there... This was something entirely new, you understand, all the more so since it contradicted everything that those who have eyes believe. The source of light is not in the outer world. We believe that it is only because of a common delusion. The light dwells where life also dwells: within ourselves.” (pp. 103-104)

She continues his story: “With practice, he learned to attend so carefully to the world around him that he confounded his friends by describing things he could not see. He could tell trees apart by the sounds of their shadows. He could tell how tall or wide a wall was by the pressure it exerted on his body.”

The problem with seeing the regular way, Lusseyran wrote, is that sight naturally prefers outer appearances. It attends to the surface of things, which makes it an essentially superficial sense. However, one of his greatest discoveries was how the light he saw changed with his inner condition. When he was sad or afraid, the light decreased at once. Sometimes it went out altogether, leaving him deeply and truly blind. When he was joyful and attentive, it returned as strong as ever. He learned very quickly that the best way to see the inner light and remain in its presence was to love.

Lusseyran’s story includes being captured by Nazis in 1944 and being sent to Buchenwald. Even there, he wrote that he learned how hate worked against him, not only

darkening his world but making it smaller as well. When he let himself become consumed with anger, he started running into things, slamming into walls. When he called himself back to attention, he learned that no one could turn out the light inside him without his consent. The truth is that there is a light that shines in the darkness, which is only visible there.

Now you may be wondering what in the world does this have to do with our readings today, from 2 Corinthians and from the Gospel of Mark? Well, hang in with me, and I will try to explain why I believe the gift of darkness offers us new and miraculous ways of dwelling in the Light and Love of Jesus.

In the reading from second Corinthians, we hear, “We walk by faith and not by sight... [where] the love of Christ urges us on... So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new!”

My friends, what does it really mean “to see”? What does it mean to see with the eyes of faith- not superficially as we have been taught, and in many ways, conditioned to see only the outward appearance of things? Over all this time, we lose the deeper sense of being able to see within, even in what seems to be an experience of utter darkness, a total absence of light. If, as Lusseyran describes, in the presence of Love, in the practice and discipline of Love, darkness itself can bestow the gift of inner light, new perspective, and sharper vision.

Barbara Brown Taylor also draws important attention to a detail I never quite appreciated. “In the Book of Genesis, darkness was first; light came second. Darkness was upon the face of the deep before God said anything. Then God said “light” and there was light, but the second word God said was not “darkness” because the darkness was already there.” She concludes, “All I know is that darkness was not created, it was already there.” God’s creative act was to make light and separate it from the darkness, calling the light “day” and the darkness “night.” ... we have turned this story into a story of opposition by loading it with values that are not in the story itself. Nowhere does it say that light is good and darkness is bad. My friends, we have much, I think, to unlearn.

In the Gospel text from Mark, we hear the familiar parables of the sower, the seed, and the mustard seed. So often, over the years, I have heard the typical sermons preached about the quality of the soil, and the power of that tiniest seed that can grow into the mightiest of all seeds. All well and good. But over these past weeks, I have noticed that it is the power of the darkness in which the seed mysteriously sprouts and grows.

Sure, it is important to pay attention to the “quality” of the soil that is our spiritual lives... but I think these readings are asking more of us than that. How are we being called to embrace the gift of darkness in our own lives? How are we being invited to see anew, the gift of light in the very midst of a dark night of the soul?

In the readings before us today, and in the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, “We keep thinking that the problem is out there, in the things that scare us: dark nights, dark thoughts,

dark guests, dark emotions. If we could just defend ourselves better against those things, we think, then surely we would feel more solid and secure. But of course we are wrong about that, as experience proves again and again. The real problem has far less to do with what is really out there than it does with our resistance to finding out what is really out there (or, in here, I would add). The suffering comes from our reluctance to learn to walk in the dark.”

So, how can we practice learning to walk in the dark? How can you and I learn to trust more and more that there is light dwelling in the very midst of darkness and that in the darkness, we are also promised new life, new growth, new beginnings?

Brown Taylor suggests a few questions to contemplate: What helps you stay conscious even when you are afraid? What stories do you tell yourself that reinforce your fears? What have you learned in the dark that you could never have learned in the light?

In 2009, Brown Taylor describes her visit to Notre Dame de Chartres, one of the most stunning Gothic cathedrals in Europe. Yes, she was inspired by the spectacular labyrinth but what she did not expect was the church beneath the church- the vast crypt that was undamaged by the fire of 1194 and became the footprint for the new cathedral that would rise above. The crypt is one long mall of chapels: seven Romanesque ones along the sides and the Chapel of Notre Dame de Sous-Terre at the end- Our Lady of the underground- a low, dark cavern with dark wood pews. Above the altar is a small wooden statue of a Madonna and child, carved to replace the more ancient one destroyed during the French Revolution. Mother and child are so dark, it is difficult to see them from a distance. The Madonna’s eyes are closed. Her son’s are wide open. Art historians count the statue among the many “Vierges noires”, the black Virgins.

In the gift store of the cathedral, Barbara Brown Taylor finds a silver medal with the Madonna’s image on it and her mantra on the back, “All must come through me in order to live in the light.” She says, “Our Lady of the Underground never asks me to choose between day and night. If I want to flourish, I need the everchanging light of darkness as much as I need the full light of day. *Give your heart to them, both*, she says. When I complain that I cannot see as well at night as I can during the day, she tells me this is a good thing. *Maybe it will slow you down*. When I tell her that I cannot get as much done at night because darkness makes me sleepy, she says yes, that is the plan. *Maybe you will get some rest*. ... She is always right. What do you want from me? I ask her. Nothing, she says.” Perhaps we lose so much insight by our own hesitancy, fears, and resistance from embracing darkness as friend and companion, just as we are inclined to embrace the light.

In the last sermon I preached, I shared my love for Psalm 139. That psalm, too, has much to say about darkness... and much for me to learn...

If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.

If I say, "Surely the darkness will cover me, and the light around me turn to night,"

Darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light to you are both alike.

My body was not hidden from you, while I was being made in secret and woven in the depths of the earth.

Today, we are given an invitation to embrace the darkness of our lives in new and creative ways. We are invited to discover the gifts that the darkness has to offer us. We are invited to dwell in the darkness and find the light that dwells therein. We are invited to practice, learning to walk in the dark.

Such a journey promises discoveries unimagined, and miracles unforeseen! Come, let us practice learning to walk in the dark, together. Come, let us discover that the light that moves outside of us, dwells powerfully within, and as we trust in that light in the midst of the darkness, we will trust more and more in the light that is the power of Love. Such is the lesson of the parable. Such is the way of Jesus. Amen.