

“How Many Methodists Does It Take....?”

Psalm 133; I John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

Holy Humor Sunday, April 12, 2015

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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With apologies to those to whom I have previously told this:

“Knock-knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Impatient cow.”

“Impatien-MOO!”

While this is not a sermon about patience, patience is certainly a spiritual gift we need as we wait for the promises of these scriptures. “Unity” in the psalm, “right conduct” in the epistle (“walking in the light”), and “faith” in the Gospel are generally not easily or quickly acquired.

We not only need to “walk in the light” but we also need a light touch. Holy Humor Sunday is a modern incarnation of the ancient tradition of observing the Sunday after Easter as “Bright Sunday.” The Joyful Noiseletter publication notes that an often-overlooked aspect of faith is joy (www.joyfulnoiseletter.com). Joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness is usually connected to favorable outward circumstances. “Joy,” as Christians understand it, is an inward radiance regardless of outward circumstances.

This Gospel for the Sunday after Easter hints at this kind of joy. It hints at it because it opens by telling us the disciples were in the house where they met with the doors locked in fear of the authorities. When the Risen Christ appeared to them, they rejoiced. So at first blush their joy was related to the outward circumstance of Christ’s resurrection.

Yet there had to be an inner joy, too. The threat of the authorities was still very real. Jesus’ relationship to the disciples was clearly going to change; or at the very least, the form in which he was present to them had changed. This change allowed him to speak a word of peace to their fearful hearts and give them the gift of God’s Holy Spirit.

Speaking of change, how many Methodists DOES it take to change a light bulb? *CHANGE?!? WHADDYA MEAN, CHANGE?!?* Part of what provides that joy is an ability to laugh at ourselves, which is where humor comes in. G.K. Chesterton observed: *“Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly.”*

But let’s be honest: it’s hard to take ourselves or life lightly when circumstances weigh heavily on us. I do not support the saying *“Laugh and the world laughs with you; cry and you cry alone.”* This is not the nature of Christian community.

The nature of Christian community is to take us in as we are, in all our complexity and struggles. This seems to be Thomas’ experience. For reasons unnamed he was not there when Jesus first appeared. A week later he was. Jesus again mysteriously appears in the house with locked doors and knows of Thomas’ ultimatum to touch Jesus’ wounds before he would believe.

This year, for the first time among the many times I have read this story, I found myself wondering, *“I wonder what Thomas’ prayers were like in the time between his ultimatum and Jesus’ fulfillment of it?”* Was his demand hyperbolic, being so sure that Jesus was dead that he didn’t have a prayer to be able to touch the wounds? Was his demand hopeful, so that his prayers followed along the lines of *“If this be possible...?”* Were his prayers less about meeting the Risen Jesus and more about his disciple-brothers, with skepticism about what they professed or thanksgiving for it? I just wondered because I do think that our prayers can lead us toward, or away from, joy.

One temptation is to make prayer serve our needs only. A faithful church member prayed *“Lord, summer is coming. Our family would really like to go to Hawaii but can’t afford to fly. But if you could build a bridge we could drive.”* The Lord replied, ***“My child, you have been faithful, but considering the state of the world this is a rather selfish request. Besides, think of the cost of***

the materials, the impact on the environment, the difficulties of the engineering design. Please consider another prayer.”

So the church member prayed, *“Very well, Lord. Help me understand my children and they understand my spouse and me.”*

There was a long pause. Then the Lord replied, *“You want two or four lanes on that bridge?”*

It seems to me that those prayers that lead us toward joy do tend to follow Jesus’ model that he taught us in the Lord’s Prayer and modeled for us in the garden: *“Thy Will be Done.”* So while we’ll never know what Thomas’ prayers were in that week before he met the Risen Jesus, we know the results of that encounter, his declaration of belief, *“My Lord and my God.”*

We also know that in that encounter Thomas had his ultimatum met: he got to touch Jesus’ wounds. Some of you know that I have had two cervical discectomies, neck surgeries that left a vertical scar neatly hidden in my many neck wrinkles. When I was recovering from the first surgery over 20 years ago, there was tightness around the scar and my physical therapist told me *“You have to manipulate the scar.”* Unlike Thomas, I definitely did NOT want to touch my scar.

I wonder if it is true for you, as I discovered for myself, that this is also a metaphor for how I deal with pain, ugliness and sinfulness in my life. I don’t want to touch it. I want to ignore it and hope it will go away. I certainly don’t want to examine it.

Still, I did what my physical therapist told me and—what a surprise!—the scar did become looser and more supple. The physiological reason is that the layers of skin in the scar have to be loosened with manipulation to make them more fluid.

As a metaphor we can apply this to our spiritual scars. They need to be touched, respected and manipulated by the love and grace of God to be fully healed. Such healing makes the peace

Jesus bestows a reality. It makes the joy he promises a reality. It makes his living presence, for us as for Thomas, a reality.

How many Methodists does it take to do that? All of us. For us, as for Thomas, the healing and the encounter with the Risen Christ takes place in community. May we be that community, continuing to be so for those who have already found Christ here and discovered anew for the Thomas' among us and within us. Amen.