

The Difference between Night and Day

Luke 4.1-13

Second Sunday in Lent

February 28, 2010

Relationships are meant to be signs of God's love
for humanity as a whole and each person in particular.

- Henri J. M. Nouwen

Spiritual maturity is an acceptance of life in relationship.

- Jack Kornfield

The Reading

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' ⁴Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." ' ⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' ⁸Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." ' ⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", ¹¹and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." ' ¹²Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." ' ¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The Full Light of Day

What is the difference between night and day? How do we know when the night is past and the full light of day upon us? An Hassidic tale preserves the memory of a Rabbi who thought such questions worthy of response, so one morning he woke his students before dawn and led them to the crest of a hill overlooking their town and posed the question of them; how do you know when the night is past and the full light of day upon us? He patiently listened to their dependably typical answers; one suggested it is fully day when warmth from the rising sun dissipates the morning dew; another responded that it is day when you can distinguish a cow

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from a horse in the distance; yet another suggested that the new day is signaled by the sound of the cock's crow. The Rabbi waived off all their answers – no, no, and no – and responded to the question himself. How do you know when the night is truly past? It is, he said, when you can look into the eyes of any man or woman and see your brother or sister; because until you can do this, it's still night.

The Rabbi is right; there is a stark difference between night and day, darkness and light, obscurity and clarity, ignorance and insight, isolation and companionship. There is a stark difference between night and day, and from a spiritual perspective the difference is *community*. Living in the full light of day depends on seeing, as Jack Cornfield suggests, that spiritual maturity is an acceptance of life in relationship.

The life of faith is life in relationship or, more accurately, life in a rich tapestry of intimate and interwoven relationships. It includes your personal relationship with God, to be sure, but it also includes relationships with others in the community of faith, and with those in need beyond the community wherever they may be found: in Haiti, Chile, Myanmar... wherever there is need. Note, please, that it's not possible to keep these relationships separate and distinct. St. Augustine found this to be true. When he finally wearied of his search for God, and of his search for his own soul; he finally turned to his neighbor and, in so doing, reports that he found all three: God, his soul, and his neighbor.

The life of faith depends for its vitality on the creation of spiritual community. This is such an important affirmation with which to begin our Lenten journey, because our journey to Jerusalem will not be complete, and certainly not effective, if we walk alone. We will not be able to find our way to that empty garden tomb outside the gates of Jerusalem without the aid of our faith community; without seeing God in the eyes of our sisters and brothers.

Temptation and Community

You may find this a strange introduction to a sermon based on the temptation of Jesus, because this passage would seem to have little to say about community. For all practical intents and purposes, Jesus faced his temptation alone in the wilderness, depending exclusively on his intimate relationship with God. What does this passage have to say about community?

If taken in isolation, little to nothing; but if considered in the context of Jesus' life, it speaks volumes.

Luke places this grand temptation scene at the beginning of Jesus' ministry; but it preserves for us the profound temptations that Jesus faced throughout his very human life. It illustrates the temptations Jesus faced while treading the dusty roads of Galilee, while trying to open the eyes of humankind to God, or while reaching out to heal the sick.

Jesus was tempted, sorely tempted, but I submit to you that he did not face his temptation alone. He faced it within the community he called about himself; the community that we name the Kingdom of God. Jesus called disciples into this community for companionship, for support, for comfort; and this is a significant message for us because we cannot face temptation alone. If we have any hope of rising above and moving beyond the profound temptations of our lives, that hope will be found within the heart of a community that provides support, acceptance, companionship, challenge, advice, comfort, and strength.

Three Simple Steps

That being said, let's talk about community. Specifically, let's talk about what we can do to nurture community in our midst. For then and only then will we be able to face temptation, grow spiritually, and pool our talents and resources in vital ministry to reach out to the larger community around us. I must limit myself to three suggestions this morning, three acts of community building that we have discussed in our prayer study groups; three steps toward discerning the difference between night and day.

The first way to discern the difference between night and day and to walk in the full light of day is to invest yourself in the lives of other people; to concern yourself not with your needs alone but with their needs as well; to look for opportunities to comfort, support, and help others along the way of faith. How do you begin? Simple; listen closely, listen deeply to the cares, concerns, and joys of others. It's easy, and quite common, to listen to the words that someone speaks and not hear what she or he is trying to say, because most of what comes from our heart is not contained within the words; you have to listen for the subtext, the implied meaning; you have to listen for what sneaks in around the edges of words. You have to listen

for the cry for help nestled within an arrogant assertion, or the admission of vulnerability in casual conversation. Listen deeply, and you will discover opportunities to nurture and nourish the life of the other, and life in community. Community begins when we deeply listen to each other, as John Fox has noted in a simple poem:

When someone deeply listens to you
It is like holding out a dented cup
you've had since childhood
and watching it fill up with
cold, fresh water.
When it balances on top of the brim,
You are understood.
When when it overflows and touches your skin,
You are loved.

When someone deeply listens to you,
the room where you stay
starts a new life
and the place where you wrote
your first poem
begins to glow in your mind's eye.
It is as if gold has been discovered!

When someone deeply listens to you,
your bare feet are on the earth
and a beloved land that seemed distant
is now at home within you.

When someone deeply listens to you new possibilities open up. When we deeply listen to each other, community begins.

How can we discern the difference between night and day and walk in the full light of day? Secondly, by creating a safe place for people, a place in which they know that they will not only be heard, but supported and affirmed as well. The community of grace – God's Church – should be the first place one could look for such a supportive community. But this is not always, or even usually, the case. Remember, please, a safe place is one in which I can confide my weaknesses as well as my strengths. A safe place is one in which I do not have to put on airs and pretend that all is hunky dory all the time. A safe place is one in which I can talk with others openly and honestly about my temptations without fear of rejection or judgment.

A safe place is crucial for personal growth and spiritual development. Think about it. What hope does anyone have of facing temptation if they can't admit their temptation? What hope does anyone have of overcoming an addiction unless they can openly ask for help? Creating a safe place in which people can talk about their spiritual life, its weaknesses as well as its strengths, to talk not only about the heights to which they have risen in their spiritual life but to talk about the things that drag them down; creating such a safe place is crucial to the faith community. I find it ironic that we spend most of our time trying to overcome the things that drag us down; we spend most of our time trying to climb out of the pit; yet in the one place we should receive help along the way we are afraid to talk about such things for fear of rejection or judgment.

Why are we so often afraid to offer a safe place to others? Are we afraid that it will reveal cracks in our armor? Are we afraid that we will be rejected and judged as well? If so, we should discard those fears. It is okay to reveal cracks in our armor, because we all have them. It is okay to reveal our weaknesses, because spiritual community is not measured by the eloquent stories of the spiritual heights to which we have attained, but by the stories of people who were broken coming together to find healing and wholeness. Such a community begins with a sense of safety.

I have had more than enough experience with churches that refuse to offer a safe place, and with the barriers to personal and spiritual growth they represent. I was raised in a church characterized by what I call a culture of suspicion. That is to say, the default attitude was to assume an individual had the wrong motives, had made the wrong decisions, and was definitely lacking in faith and in need of repentance and cleansing. This was especially true if one had questions about faith, or difficulties living the life prescribed and demanded by the church. Any weakness, in other words, was a sure sign of spiritual malaise.

Looking back it is easy to see how many of the problems with which I struggled in my younger years could have been easily addressed and resolved by allowing me to discuss them; simply to discuss them. If someone had taken the time to deeply listen to me, acknowledge the cracks in her or his own armor, and seek the light of day with me, my path could have been smoothed out significantly. As it was, the church was scared to death of problems in the real

world; scared to death that the castle it had built in the air would come tumbling down if candor was allowed in.

What a shame; what a pity that God's faith community is so often guided by fear and a perceived need to hide our innermost thoughts and feelings. What a pity that God's community of grace is so often characterized by a sense of strict justice. What a pity that God's compassionate embrace is so often denied to those who need it most. What in the world are we afraid of? I ask you; with God on our side, as Paul says, what in the world are we afraid of?

How can we discern the difference between night and day and walk in the full light of day? Finally, I would say, by investing ourselves in the ministry of presence. There can be no community unless the people come together. We shouldn't come to church looking for what we can get out of it; rather, we come together to be the people of God. We come together to be the community of Christ; to deeply listen and to offer a safe place of nurture and affirmation. I've said this before and I'll say it again, don't ever underestimate the power of presence; because if you are truly present to someone, he or she knows it and, to put it simply, lives are changed.

A Sunday morning greeter recently recognized an acquaintance from the business world enter with his family, so he welcomed them into his church. It's good to see you, he said. What brings you here today? Church shopping, was the reply. This response didn't quite click with the greeter's experience of church and, before he knew it he blurted out, church shopping; well, how much are you prepared to spend? Folks, you can't shop for church. You can invest yourself in a faith community; but if you're just looking for the cutting edge program, the church that will offer you community clout, or the fine arts program you can be proud of, you will ultimately be disappointed. You can't shop for spiritual community because there is not enough money in the world to buy it. There is good news, however; God offers us spiritual community as a gift. God offers us the full light of day in which to walk together, pray together, grow together, and serve others together. We simply have to look into the eyes of every man, woman, or child and see our brothers and sisters.