

Passion Sunday Homily

Aspen Chapel, April 2, 2006

by Cynthia Bourgeault

“True love demands sacrifice because true love is a transforming force and the beginning of union at a higher level.”

I first read these words more than ten years ago in an essay on the Lord’s Prayer written by an anonymous contemporary Christian mystic. Even then they sent a numinous shiver up my spine. I still don’t fully understand what they mean. But I recognize their truth and their overwhelming bearing on my own human meaning and destiny.

Over the next two weeks Christians will be talking a lot about sacrifice as we enter the time of Holy Week and our celebration of the Paschal mystery. But so often still, this sacrifice is couched in terms of guilt and punishment. God was angry at the human race, so he demanded the sacrifice of his only Son. But how can this have anything to do with love, let alone true love? How does it heal anything? This classic theology in fact obscures the meaning of this mysterious and profound act of reconciliation.

We get closer to the meaning of this sacrifice in the little dramatic ceremony we’ve all just witnessed. At least we can see that the basis is love. For whatever reason, Jesus has seen and fully accepts the necessity of his own death. And this woman who loves him, be it Mary of Bethany or Mary Magdalene, understanding and fully accepting his decision comes forward to enact what amounts to extreme unction- anointing him before his death, in an act of costly and vulnerable self-communion. He is indeed proclaimed the Messiah, the anointed one, but not in the realm of kingly power, but through the sacrament of love. And the ceremony does indeed hint at the “transforming force” in all this: like the perfume released from Mary’s jar, the fragrance of his faithful love, tenderness and compassion will be released into the world as a transforming mercy for all to draw on.

In my take, the very best theology of the passion is Jesus’ own which we’ve just heard read in the Gospel today, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single grain, but if it dies, it shall yield a rich harvest.” Like a seed, we have to “die” to something –something which at first defines and protects us – before we can emerge fully into who we are, before the deepest creative potential is released in us. And this is true for a grain, a person, the Son of God, and the Divine Mystery itself.

But perhaps the real clue to the mystery lies in a word easily overlooked: it remains a single grain, isolated and cut off, living in its own self-referential world. As it “dies” it allows itself to come into contact with those transformative elements in the earth, rain and sun, and by giving itself to the exchange, it begins to grow. It opens itself into the web of relationship in which and through which transformation becomes a living reality.

We've been looking at this principle during our Wisdom School this past week. It goes by many names – co-inherence, the exchange, the luminous web. The basic idea is that all reality, visible and invisible is connected in a web of relationships – of reciprocal give and take and mutuality – whose final end product is the glory of God fully manifest. We live in, of and toward others, not in ourselves alone. This mystical idea, incidentally, is paralleled and confirmed in a lot of the findings of contemporary quantum physics, which speak of the instantaneous exchange of information going on at the quantum level through the more or less constant creation and annihilation of subatomic particles. Our theoretically stable universe of mountains and valleys is being maintained from inside by a riotous dance of self-communication back and forth across the threshold of existence.

One person who got this very well is the modern Episcopal theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor, writing about the changes in her theology brought about by her exposure to the findings of contemporary quantum physics. She writes –

“Where is God in this picture? God is all over the place. God is up there, down here, inside my skin and out. God is in the web, the energy; the space, the light – not captured in them, as if any of those concepts were more real than what unites them – but revealed in that singular, vast net of relationship that animates everything that is.”

From this remarkable insight, she moved on to an even more remarkable conclusion:

“At this point in my thinking, it is not enough for me to proclaim that God is responsible for all this unity. Instead, I want to proclaim that God is the unity – the very energy, the very intelligence, the very elegance and passion that make it all go.”

This in traditional mystical language would be called “the glory of God”, divine love made full, manifest. But note her nuance here – our visible, created universe is not simply an object created by a wholly other God in order to manifest this love – but that it is love itself – the very heart of God, fully expressive in time and form. The exchange is what God is, where God dwells.

In fact, we can learn from a dictionary that “merc” – an old Etruscan cognate- is the common root of the term commerce, mercantile, and the word “mercy”. The principle uniting these words is the principle of exchange – as we participate in the freely flowing exchange of Divine creativity mercy is manifested. To refuse to participate – to stand rigidly apart, self-sufficient or self-pitying – is to die.

And thus, in all his teachings Jesus emphasizes this exchange in all its fullness. “I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me as I in you.” “Behold, I give you a new commandment; to love one another as I have loved you.” In parable after parable – the prodigal son, the laborers in the vineyard, the feeding of the multitudes, the lilies of the field, he urges us to die to our sense of self-sufficiency or self-righteousness, our petty grievances or compulsion to defend our turf, and instead enter the river of generosity and abundance that sweeps through the cosmos and our own lives - the moment we open fully to it. The moment we let ourselves die into it.

What does this have to do with the upcoming Paschal celebration and Christ's self sacrifice on the cross, understood as "a transforming force and the beginning of union at a higher level?" Perhaps this –

The deepest and most profound dimension of the exchange is to carry another's burden. Not just with them, but for them, in place of them, to be willing to die in another's stead – so that that other may live is a willingness that transcends our human limitations and shows forth – however briefly – what God is like. Perhaps some of you have experienced that willingness in your own lives – in your prayer to stand in the place of a loved one who is struggling with terminal illness or immense suffering. True love does that. It is a strange and tender place, too powerful and overwhelming to stand in for long. However briefly, it belongs to and manifests the heart of God. But it is real. And it is the driveshaft of the mercy – it's what makes the whole thing keep going.

In the Passion, then, Jesus willingly puts himself in this place. He has preached it; now he will model it and sanctify it as a path. He sees where we're stuck, this messy approach/avoidance of the human condition as we approach the divine mercy. We reach out, we draw back; we get hurt and we freeze; we love and our hearts are broken. And so it is, and must be, in this blessed, broken, fragile place. And yet the exchange must go on, and we must bear each other's burdens and die into each other's birthings, or else the glory of God fades from the garden, and cut off from the vine, the branches wither and die.

And so he reaches out his hand and says "here – I will stand in your place on this one – take your deepest fear, the fear of your own death and all the finality death implies – so that you can be released to live your life in all the fullness and abundance of the exchange which is your true nature and destiny. And yes, your heart will be broken, like the alabaster jar, like the bread of the Eucharist – but fear not: you will not be overcome, for love, like a river, will carry you to that place where all your deepest yearnings will bear fruit.