

RESTORED TO ONE'S RIGHT MIND

(01/29/12)

Scripture Lessons: Galatians 6:1
Mark 5:1-17

"My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness." (Gal 6:1)

By now many of you may have heard that Cole, the little boy whose story I shared with you last Sunday, has died. Sharon Willman, who brought the needs of this family to our attention, has informed us that Cole lost his battle with cancer this past weekend. His parents and his sister were with him when he died. They said it was very peaceful.

In an e-mail to the Diaconate this week, Sharon said, "This family has been through so much. They know, however, that Cole is at peace and out of pain. They still will have quite a struggle to get back on their feet and try to begin life as a family again - minus one. I know we will all continue to keep them in our thoughts and prayers." We will. And we will continue to do whatever we can to help. Thank you, Sharon, for inviting us into this family's life, making it possible for us to become a part of their lives and for them to become a part of ours.

I can't believe how deeply this little boy who, as of last Sunday was in the last throes of a losing battle with a cancer that ravaged his little body, touched all of us in this church. I knew that his story touched me when I heard it, but I had no idea that it would touch me as deeply as it did. Maybe it was the description of his struggles and the unbearable pain he endured. Maybe it was the tremendous heartbreak and feelings of helplessness that his parents have experienced for the last two years. I don't know what it was, but this little boy and his family found their way into my heart; they found their way into our hearts.

I hear a lot of sad stories. I believe that I keep myself fairly up to date with what is happening in our country and around the world. I read of the estimated 100,000 children who recently starved to death in Somalia because the world community dithered, because they did not respond quickly enough to pleas for aid. My heart goes out to them. They, too, are children of God. But this little boy touched me deeply.

The Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chodron has said that every once in a while something will break through the walls of our defenses and touch the soft spot, the tender spot in our heart. She says there is a soft spot, a tender spot, a vulnerable spot in all us. With some of us it is just more highly defended than with others. But every once in a while something or someone will break through. Pema Chodron says that in that moment, we are truly in nirvana, in what Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

In the description of Cole's struggle that I read last Sunday here in church I was brought to tears by his parents' expression of gratitude that their son could be with them for Christmas. They were thankful that they were able to sit with him in the Children's Unit of Tufts Medical Center and hold his hand as he died. The feeling that I have for these parents is not sympathy; it is not really empathy because I have (thankfully) never had to face anything that is even remotely near to what they have had to face; it is not really admiration; it is much closer to awe. I stand in awe of those parents.

When I encounter people like Cole's parents, people who can experience true joy and peace in the midst of tremendous physical and/or emotional pain, I get very curious. How can they do what they obviously do? What makes them the people that they are? I wonder whether, if I were in the same situation, I would be able to handle it as courageously as they did. I would hope I would. But in my heart of hearts I have my doubts.

I don't know Cole's parents. I have never met them and I probably never will. I am not their pastor and we are not their church. I don't know what church they attend, if they do indeed attend church, or in what religious body they claim membership. In a sense, I really don't care. I don't care if they are Protestants, if they are Christians, if they are agnostics or even atheists, though I would be very surprised if they were. Whatever their religious affiliation, I know that they "have it." They get the message. And they are living it out in their lives.

Different religious traditions describe "it" differently. The Buddha tells us that each and every one of us has a Buddha nature, a divine spark within us. When we are in touch with our Buddha nature, when we are in relationship with

it, when we live out of it, a beautiful, a caring, a compassionate, a loving life flows forth. When we are grounded in this Buddha nature, we will not only grasp the great lesson of the impermanence of life; we will be at peace with it. I think these parents grasp the deeper meaning of the Buddha's teaching.

I think these parents also grasp the deeper meaning of Jesus' teaching. Jesus affirms the biblical teaching that we are all made in the image and likeness of God. At our core, at our very core, is God. There is a spark of the Divine in each and every one of us, a spark of the Divine that we experience as our immortal soul. Jesus tells us that he has come to help us experience the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of God that is within. When we live our lives out of the Kingdom of God, we are already in heaven; we are in the realm of the eternal. Only a beautiful, a caring, a compassionate, a loving life can flow from this. This, as Jesus showed, can help us not only accept suffering and death but actually transcend them.

Once again, I don't know anything about the religious faith or beliefs that have helped these parents carry a cross that would bring most of us to our knees, but I know it is there. I also wonder what kind of faith little Cole had, and how that faith helped him face not only his illness but also his death. I suspect he had something, something he probably gleaned from his parents that brought him both comfort and strength. From what I know about this family, I can believe that Cole, his siblings, and his parents were truly at peace when Cole finally died. I stand in awe of such a powerful testimony to faith and to the strengthening, comforting, healing power and presence of God.

To change the subject a little, but not really, Sharon's description of Cole and his family stand in marked contrast to what I imagine to be the family life and the faith experience of so many of the young boys and girls who are incarcerated within the juvenile justice system, the youths to whom we also reach out as a church through Straight Ahead Ministries, our mission recipient for this month.

These boys and girls probably stepped out into life without the medical infirmities that Cole had. They may have healthy bodies, but they are missing something. They are missing that which Cole and his family have. It is not that it

is not there, because I believe that the Core, the spark of the Divine is at the center of each and every one of us. However, because of the experiences these young people had in childhood, or because of the absence of loving experiences, they cannot access it. They cannot find their grounding in it. They cannot live their lives out of it. As a consequence, their lives come out twisted and angry.

There are several responses that we can take to young men and women who have demonstrated their inability or their unwillingness to live as constructive and contributing members of our society, who are socio-paths, who have a pathological relationship with society. We have to begin by taking them off the streets. We have to protect ourselves from them. One of the functions of government is to protect its citizens. No one has the right to hurt other people.

We also need to teach them that actions have consequences. It does them no good if they get away with breaking the law, with killing members of another gang, with harming innocent people. The Buddhists call this karma. Karma is nothing more than the consequences of our actions. The Buddhists believe that karma, whether it is the bad karma that flows from bad actions or the good karma that flows from good actions, stays with us. It even transcends our death. I think that most Christians would agree.

The third response or goal of the criminal justice system is rehabilitation. We need to rehabilitate these young people. If we do not rehabilitate them, when they are released they will relapse to their socio-pathic ways. We cannot simply put them in jail and throw away the keys. We already have the highest percentage of our citizens within our penal system of any developed country in the world. When one out of every 100 people in our country is a part of the justice system and one in every 30 has been at some time in their life. We are obviously not doing something right.

The problem may lie with the term "rehabilitation." Many of these young people do not need to be re-habilitated; they need to be habilitated. They never experienced what I suspect that Cole experienced from and within his family.

Most of the kids who are helped by Straight Ahead Ministries never had caring, loving, stable parents. Most of them never had any kind of religious

upbringing. When temptation arose, there was nothing inside them to do battle with it. Some of them don't even have a conscience. This is what makes them so dangerous. When the internal restraints and shaping influences on behavior like a conscience, a moral code, and a religious faith are lacking, society has to respond with external restraints: laws, police, courts, jails, prisons, and perhaps even by putting the offender to death. If you have the inner restraints, the inner guidance system, you don't need the outer ones.

Straight Ahead Ministries knows that something important is missing in these young people's lives. They're missing a deep and meaningful religious faith. They are missing a relationship with God through Jesus. When they look within, they do not see the Holy Spirit, the spark of the Divine, the Kingdom of God, they see only hatred, darkness, and despair. Is it any wonder that they are living the life they are, a life that promises to be short and violent with their inner pain tranquilized by drugs, a life that destroys both themselves and others?

We believe that there is a spark of the Divine within each and every one of us. All we have to do is find it. Once we find it, once we experience it, we can live out of it. This is our "right mind." Buddhists call it our "Buddha mind" or nirvana. Jesus calls it the Holy Spirit or the Kingdom of God within. We need to be restored to this mind. We need to be reconnected with our true center. This is all it would take to rehabilitate the young people in the juvenile justice system. And this is what Straight Ahead Ministries, with its commitment to preach and incarnate the Gospel to these young people, is doing so successfully.

There are several accounts in the Bible of people who were "not in their right mind" and who were restored to it. Cain was not in his right mind when he killed his brother, Abel. Saul was not in his right mind when he was filled with murderous rage against David. David was not in his right mind when he arranged for his trusted servant Uriah to be killed so he could take possession of Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. The people who crucified Jesus were not in their right mind. Jesus knew that they did not understand what they were doing. Those whom the Bible describes as being possessed by a demon or demons could be said to not be in their right mind.

Jesus came to heal us both physically and emotionally. He restored the sight of the blind man. He broke the laws of the Sabbath when he restored the man's withered hand. He exorcized the demons from the man who was possessed. I find it interesting that in the account of this healing, we read, "They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind."

We know that Jesus not only healed people's bodies, he helped people be restored to their right mind. We know that he can help us be restored to our right mind when we are not living the kind of life that God calls us to live. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, tells us how we can help each other to do this. Paul writes, "My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness."

I think that if we are to truly rehabilitate these young people, if we are to restore them to their right mind, to their true mind, to their true nature, we should strive to do so not through the administration of cruel and harsh punishment but in a spirit of gentleness. This is the mission of Straight Ahead Ministries.

We hope and pray that the young people in the juvenile justice system might turn out to be the kind of children that Cole was, the kind of young person and adult that Cole would have become had he been granted the blessing of a longer life. We hope and pray that they somehow come to experience the kind of care and love that I believe Cole experienced from his parents. We pray that they might discover the kind of faith, the religious resources that I believe Cole had and that he experienced in his parents, a depth of faith that enabled Cole's parents and also him to face his illness and even his death with peace, with joy, and with gratitude for the gift of each and every day.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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