

Service of Solace
December 3, 2011
St. Matthew's Episcopal Church

Tonight we come together in a sanctuary, a holy place set aside for holy tears and holy hope.

Tonight we come together at a time when our emotions may seem contrary to the way we think we should feel. After all, isn't the holiday season the happiest time of the year? Isn't it the time of year when we sing "Joy to the World?" Perhaps, but perhaps not as well.

Grief and Joy...they seem so diametrically opposed to one another, so paradoxical. And that is what our culture would certainly have us believe. Our society seems to think we are not complex enough to feel both at the same time. Our society wants us to feel only one thing at a time, to feel what is "appropriate." What does that mean?

What is the appropriate emotion for the death of a life-long love? What is the appropriate emotion for losing one's job, one's marriage, and one's self-esteem?

What is the appropriate emotion for becoming the parent of one's parents at the same time as one is still parenting one's children? Is there any appropriate emotion?

How do we navigate the waters of grief in a boat we never wanted to get on? How do we walk into a darkness that we never asked for?

Michael Dwinell is an Episcopal Priest and psychotherapist. In his book "Being Priest to One Another" he writes of an experience he had with one of his therapy groups. He had a friend by the name of Cindy who was an environmental educator. She works with people on a psychological, spiritual and environmental level at integrating these aspects of their lives. She called it "walking into nature." The priest in me calls it "walking into God."

One winter she took Michael and his group to a place where the forest met the sea. They walked silently to this place. It was a very cold night, very cold, very dark and very still. They came to a precipice. Cindy

asked the group to face the sea and to just listen to the pounding of the waves and to look at the vastness of the sea.

After a while, the pounding of the sea, matched the pounding of Michael's heart. The two merging together in harmony to the point that he couldn't tell where one left off and the other began.

Cindy then had the group face the forest-the darkness before them that seemed impenetrable. Three times she had the group face the sea and then the forest...sea, forest, sea, forest, sea, forest.

The group was then instructed to walk into the forest and Cindy asked them to walk into the darkest place they could find and then to stop and listen and look around them.

Michael wrote that looking into the deep darkness of the trees in front of him was like looking into "black holes," those vast areas of outer space where everything collapses and falls in on itself, where nothing can live, where the magnetic force is so strong that once in it's grip there is no hope of extricating yourself. The force inside a black hole is so strong that it pulls all in its wake into the very center of the cosmos itself.

But as Michael and his group entered the black holes of darkness they were "surprised and amazed because right there in the deepest darkness was light. Perhaps faint, perhaps only the reflection from a frozen puddle, but there was always light in the darkness...the darker it became, the more visible the light. Darkness and light were not enemies."¹

The darkness and light were not enemies...although they seem diametrically opposed to one another, paradoxical in their relationship, they are not. They are intimately intertwined with one another. And so it is with grief and joy. They are not enemies. They are not opposed to one another, but intertwined in the dance of life. To know life, we must know both.

¹ "Being Priest to One Another" Michael Dwinell, Triumph Books, 1993, p. 26-27.

When we make the decision to enter the black holes of our grief, when we feel that our life has collapsed and has fallen in on itself, when it seems that there is no end in sight to the dark times, it is then that we will see the light that was there all along...perhaps only faintly, but it is there none-the-less.

What's more, when we approach the dark hole of our grief we may feel ourselves being pulled ever deeper into it. What if the power that is drawing us deeper into our pain, what if the magnetic pull we can't extricate ourselves from is not chaos and death, but God pulling us into the very center of himself? What if what we face is the love of Christ beckoning us into an embrace that is so tight we become one with him? What if...

There is a part of this story that has struck me. The group had to face the sea before facing the forest, it had to face outward before it found the strength and courage to go inward.

How do we walk into a darkness that we never asked for? The very same way. Reaching outward to those who can love us through it, who know that whatever emotion we feel is appropriate. It is in facing the vast expanse of life and relationships that we take those first tentative steps on our inward journey that will take us directly into the heart of God.

As Christians our belief is grounded not in death, but in life, not in the crucifixion, as important and foundational as that is to our belief, but in the resurrection. That is the ongoing story this Advent.

We worship a God that comes to us in human form; that grabs onto us so tightly that it seems God will never let go. And the truth we live and die into is just that; that God won't ever let go of us.

Because of Christ our grief lives with joy and our darkness lives with the light of the world at its very center.

Amen.

