

The Rev. Stanford Adams  
Epiphany IV, Year B; February 4, 2018  
The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, Austin, Texas

In our cycle of Sundays, our calendar of Sundays, this is an important day: it's Super Bowl Sunday. That's partly a joke. On this Sunday when we do something very much collectively... I want to talk about something that is very much individual for each of us.

One of my formative faith experiences was serving as a hospital chaplain during the first summer I was in seminary. Most seminary students – Episcopal ones at least – have a job that is something similar. I served as a chaplain at a large county hospital under the supervision of someone trained to help guide new ministers. It's a kind of baptism by fire for ministry students because we were tossed into a variety of different situations and then we'd talk about those situations with our supervisors and our peers. And it was a transformative experience for me.

I met people most typically in bad moments for them, and especially for folks who had asked to talk to the chaplain, these bad moments were often compounded because there in the county hospital emergency department or ICU something of their theological understanding had broken down too. What does this illness or accident mean about my relationship with God? Sometimes it was more pointed: how could God let this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?

These folks were unlike you in some ways – mostly they were not connected to a faith community – that's why they were talking to me and not their own priest or minister. And mostly we're more sophisticated than to ask these questions, at least not out loud. But I don't think it's because we have an answer. I think it's simply because we know not to ask the question and seem somehow out of control or vulnerable.

Our Gospel lesson today is about healing. And this is the kind of healing that I am most often called on to provide. The healing of a relationship with the Holy when someone no longer feels a connection to the Holy. And it can happen for a variety of reasons, but they're generally not good. I want to suggest a few features of this part of the journey, and – more than that -- I want to offer permission to ask the questions.

“A soul does not grow by addition but by subtraction.”<sup>1</sup> That's a quotation from Meister Eckhardt in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Christian writer and thinker. Jesus seems to follow this plan too with all of his time away from others, with his parables that so often overturn conventional wisdom so that at the end of the story

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in *Learning to Walk in the Dark* by Barbara Brown Taylor, Kindle location 2010.

the hearer knows less and not more; and ultimately he follows this plan with his death. Subtraction and not addition. One author says that the spiritual path for us almost always involves more un-learning than it does learning.<sup>2</sup>

Priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor writes that she's never experienced a dark night of the soul – the events for her have been less dramatic and the absence of God less stark – but even so, she writes that she's experienced what she calls a “cloudy evening of the soul.”<sup>3</sup> Maybe that fits for you too. She writes that it's not correct to think that this descends because of something we've done – that's a control mechanism. If we caused it, she writes, then we can get ourselves out of it. But that's not how it works.

Drawing from Saint John of the Cross – the 16<sup>th</sup> century priest – Brown Taylor writes that the purpose of this dark period is – her phrase here -- “to convince those who grasp after things that God cannot be grasped.”<sup>4</sup> John of the Cross, Brown Taylor says, writing in Spanish, his native language, called God “nada.” Again, quoting Brown Taylor, “God is no-thing. God is not a thing. And since God is not a thing, God cannot be held on to. God can only be encountered as that which eclipses the reality of all other things.”<sup>5</sup>

And here's where the ‘giving up’ is most acute for those of us who are religious. Maybe our ideas about God or our images of God, Brown Taylor writes, maybe they're keeping us from experiencing God.<sup>6</sup> Maybe we need to give them up into the nada that eclipses the reality of all other things. And that's why this is a sermon about permission giving, and ultimately a sermon about healing.

And it's fine to say all of this but I'm asking you to operate in a way that is highly counterintuitive for us. After I had practiced law in the same specialty for 10 years, I had much more knowledge of the subject area of my practice, I had much more practical experience about how things were likely to turn out and what steps my clients should take to get the outcome that they wanted. And that's what my clients paid me for – I could much more easily hone in on what mattered; I became certain about more and more, or at least I could tell you the probabilities in which you were operating. That's what expertise means to us.

But I am suggested that the spiritual journey works in the opposite way. We become certain about less and less, even as we become more committed to a relationship with the ultimate Mystery (capital M, mystery). Or put another way, the closer we get to union with God, the more we know that our ideas about God,

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr. *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. Kindle location 186.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, location 1668.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, location 1539.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, location 1539.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, location 1539.

our images of God, are a poor substitute. Or to put it in Barbara Brown Taylor's words:

“I cannot say for sure when my reliable ideas about God began to slip away, but the big chest I used to keep them in is smaller than a shoebox now. Most of the time, I feel so ashamed about this that I do not own up to it unless someone else mentions it first. Then we find a quiet place where we can talk about what it is like to feel more and more devoted to a relationship that we are less and less able to say anything about.”<sup>7</sup>

Our tradition has something to say about losing; something to say about ideas of what a messiah should look that don't pan out; ideas of what God's triumph must be like that are turned upside down. All of these ideas got in the way. So, if your ideas about God are turned upside down too, then you're in good company.

Paul writes in this morning's Epistle – Paul's first letter to the early followers of Jesus at Corinth – he writes that he tries to be like everyone so that he might bring them the Gospel. “I have become all things to all people,” he writes, “that I might by all means save some.”<sup>8</sup> He becomes like a Jew, and he becomes like one outside of the law. There's not one understanding that we're to follow...but we're to live lives that are informed by, defined by, the event of Christ. The one that turns what a messiah looks like on its head. Paul's answer on how to be everything to everyone is the same but with different words: empty yourself...lose your ideas that are a poor substitute...join the nada that eclipses the reality of all things.

Let me be clear that I'm talking about spiritual wilderness but not about depression. If you're depressed, you need help. Brown Taylor writes that if you're depressed, when your depression lifts things will be like they used to be. But if you're in a spiritual wilderness, when it's over you'll be different. Ideas about God rearranged, maybe fewer left. And even deeper, perhaps you'll have a different answer to the question: on what is your heart set? In what do you trust? And maybe your answers to those questions will be bent a little more closely to the Mystery that eclipses the reality of all other things.

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor, location 1546.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:22, NRSV.