

“The Bible: Ever-expanding Love”
Joel 2:12-13, 28-29

Today we look at an overarching theme in the Bible: People experiencing the presence of God and thus expanding their ability to love. In story after story in the Bible, we are told about humans having a felt experience of the presence of God which changes them and helps them to love and serve as God does. Yet, these experiences are never a once and for all kind of thing. That is why people establish rituals and practices to help them spend time in that awareness of awe on a regular basis.

In her book *Wintering*, Katherine May tells about an interesting and unusual ritual experience that she got into in order to feel centered and to cope with the depression of the winter months. She started cold-water swimming in the ocean near where she lives in England and it made a huge difference in her life. She writes, “Cold-water swimming might sound like an act of masochism, but it’s anything but. It is deeply, thrillingly pleasurable, a feat of self-preservation that dissolves stress and makes me feel brave enough to cope with anything. Immersion in cold water has been shown to release the same chemicals as the drug Ecstasy, bringing about the ‘swimmer’s high’ so well known among ice-lovers...For hours after my swim, the blood seems to shimmer in my veins. Most of all, I have been brave, and it creates a peculiar cycle: by doing a resilient thing, I feel more resilient. Cold-water swimming lets that sense of courage roll on through my days.”

That is what deep ritual and spiritual experience help us to know and do. At first, they may seem pointless, even if we enjoy them. Yet, with regular practice, they spill into the rest of our lives to help us live fearlessly and lovingly even in times of deep winter or pain. Of course, I don’t believe that cold-water swimming is for everyone, but each of us has access to the same power of presence. That is what the prophet Joel proclaimed. The occasion for the writing of Joel was a plague of locusts that ravished their land. We don’t really know if the plague was literal or metaphorical (invading army). If it was literal, it would have been a natural disaster of great magnitude. If it was metaphorical, it would have been a military disaster. This was a time of great fear and devastation. Even though the prophet acknowledged that greed and disobedience brought a lot of misery to the people, God’s ultimate answer to the problem was that of helping to transform the people through visions of God’s love and hope. Their checkered past was not going to dictate their future. Because of God’s grace and love, they were going to receive the full power of God’s Spirit so that everyone among them would be able to have dreams and visions of a different future. This vision was so powerful that the people of God held on to it for a long time and every time they faced great danger, loss, or pain, they recalled that the Spirit of God was just about to do something new. These words became motivators for them to change their lives and ways and to work for a different future by growing deeper into their faith. They inspired countless number of people to start over again! In fact, in the book of Acts in the story of Pentecost we are told that Peter saw the coming of the Holy Spirit on the eleven disciples as a fulfillment of that vision by Joel.

The experience of God’s love is what grounds us and helps to love beyond our fears and limitations. We can learn all kinds of information about faith, but that does not lead us to

know God. We can also have a few spiritual experiences, but they often wither away with time. Only when we find regular practices and rituals that help us experience God's presence, are we able to be healed and transformed. And each time we experience God's presence, we are moved into greater love. I know from personal experience that time in prayer and contemplation has healed many of my hatreds and wounds. The things I could never heal with my will power or "right thinking," were graciously healed by the Spirit of God.

Even though the fullness of God's presence is not something we will know until we are on the other side of eternity, our connection to God grows as we get deeper into God's presence. Fr. Thomas Keating talked about this as a growing friendship with God. The more time we spend in intentional listening to God, the more we know God. And the good news is that this is not something that is exclusive to the spiritually sensitive or to monks. Just like the prophet Joel proclaimed, God's Spirit is poured out "on all." When we return again and again to those rituals and practices, God's love grows in and through us.

Richard Rohr sees a pattern of faith in the Bible that helps us to learn about our own growth. He writes, "As we begin to recognize the journey of faith, we can also discern four stages, or levels, through which faith evolves: In the first stage, people start to experience the reality of God...they tend to believe that God's love is limited to just themselves, to a select few such as a chosen people or the one true Church. In the second stage, people begin to respond to God's love, but they perceive God's love as a dependent on their response. They believe that grace is a conditional gift, that God will love them if they are good, that God will save them if they keep the commandments...In the third stage, people begin to see God's love as unlimited and unconditional...But they think that God is doing that from afar, from up in heaven someplace...Finally, in the fourth stage, they make the breakthrough to seeing that God's grace and love are incarnate in human lives and interactions...They experience God's love within, loving themselves and others and redeeming the world through them. But they realize that it is God who is doing the loving, God who is doing the saving; and they surrender themselves to being channels of God's grace in the world. They let go." This of course is not a linear kind of process. Sometimes we are in all four stages at the same time or we go back and forth. But these four stages could be helpful reminders for us about where God is leading us. Instead of using them to judge ourselves or others (in the Bible or in daily life), the invitation is to focus on the Spirit of God and to continue to show up for God's redeeming and healing work in us.

Against the backdrop of locusts, disobedience, separation, pain, and plagues, Joel reminds us that the promise of God is never too far from us. God does the loving and our work is to continue to show up, trust, and let go. Richard Rohr writes about this in a reflection about self-emptying: "We were created for union. But the place of union feels like nothing. We spend most of our lives projecting and protecting our small, separate self-image. Living instead from our True Self, hidden with Christ in God, feels like no thing and no place. It doesn't come with feelings of success, others' approval, awards, promotions, or wealth. In fact, others may think us foolish or crazy. And so we put off the death of our false self. We cling to our ego because it feels substantial and essential. But the saints and mystics say, 'When I'm nobody, I'm everybody!' When I'm no one, I'm at last everyone. When I'm nothing, I'm everything. When I'm empty, I'm full. This is why so

few people truly seek an authentic spiritual life. Who wants to be nothing? We've been told the whole point was to be somebody."

John of the Cross expressed it this way:

To come to the pleasure you have not, you must go by a way in which you enjoy not. To come to the knowledge you have not, you must go by a way in which you know not. To come to the possession you have not, you must go by a way in which you possess not. To come to be what you are not, you must go by a way in which you are not."

I pray that this theme of letting go through intimacy with God will ring true for you this week. As you reflect on the journeys of others in the Bible, it is helpful to consider where they were on the journey and how God got through to them to do the redeeming work of love. As we begin the journey of Lent on Wednesday, I pray that you will try just for the 40 days of Lent, an intentional way to show up every day for a time with God.

Today we will close with Lectio Divina practice listening to Psalm 1 paraphrase. I love the image of the tree planted by the water as a metaphor for our spiritual practices:

Blessed are those

 who walk hand in hand
 with goodness,
 who stand beside virtue,
 who sit in the seat of truth;

For their delight is in the Spirit of Love,
 and in Love's heart they dwell
 day and night.

They are like trees planted by
 streams of water,
 that yield fruit in due season,
 and their leaves flourish;

And in all that they do, they give life.

The unloving are not so;
 they are like dandelions which
 the wind blows away.

Turning from the Heart of Love
 they will know suffering and pain.

They will be isolated from wisdom;
 for Love knows the way of truth,
 the way of ignorance will perish
 as Love's penetrating Light
 breaks through hearts
 filled with illusions:
 forgiveness is the way. Amen.