

June 28, 2015

“A Good Lamp”

**Matthew 6:22-23, 7:1-4
The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair**

They say that history repeats itself. They also say those those who do not remember history are condemned to repeat it.

Whoever ‘they’ are must have known the Gospel writer, Matthew, because it seems to me that Matthew learned from Jesus the proper way to follow a well-lit pathway forward, beyond those obstacles that pull us down and hinder us from being the people God wants us to be, as individuals and as part of Christ’s body as the church. It was Jesus that gave Matthew the lamp to use, the insight he had to see himself and his mission clearly and to illumine his way, and we would do well to use that same source of light in our lives.

Today is our fourth leg in our summer excursion, “Breathing Underwater” through the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, with our Spiritual Guide, Richard Rohr.

The fourth step is all about our making “a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves,” and I am confident that this process goes back far earlier than the inception of A.A. in 1935. It may have been the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, in the Fifth Century B.C. who coined the phrase ‘know thyself’: words that infer a necessary and honest self-examination of ourselves, recognizing our personal strengths and weaknesses, our talents, faults and imperfections.

The Gospel writer Matthew, or ‘Matthew Levy’, as I began to call him at the beginning of this sermon series; the notorious Tax Collector who was called to be a disciple by Jesus; surely knew something of his own process of self-accounting. Both from a personal and social standpoint, he must have done a self-assessment of his own failings, and, somewhat amazingly, redeemed by Jesus- was then able to record and pass along the message of Christ’s boundless love to billions of people throughout history.

The community of which Matthew was part when he wrote this Gospel, (in the early 80's, AD) had some issues of their own. It was an interesting social makeup, more relevant to us today than you might think. The social background of the Gospels is not something preachers tend to dwell on at length; but today it bears hearing. It wasn't just that Matthew had been dealing with his own issues of unworthiness, from having been a lackey for the Romans, collecting higher than needed taxes from his poor, city dwelling fellow Jews. The small, struggling Christian community of which he was part was dealing with a critical issue of their own. Central to their struggle was what can be called the "Gentile Question;"- that is, as Jews they had all been taught to avoid Gentiles, (all non-Jews) and to regard them as pagans. They remained separate from others to preserve their identity and not be contaminated by the 'seething Gentile masses' (who we would have been, back then.) The big debate within Matthew's community was whether and how it could be that Jesus' message could be spread to a wider community than their small inner circle. The debate itself required some serious self-examination, taking stock of the risks and rewards of obeying Jesus. Would they be open to one another? How far would they let the love of God take them?

What sealed the deal in favor of opening up the community to all was the presence of Jesus in remembering his words to them. Jesus was and is the truth, and the truth will and does set you free. (But first, as Richard Rohr reminds us, matter-of-factly; it tends to make you miserable.) Somehow, through the Holy Spirit, in Jesus came truth and honesty, an infusion of enough courage to make people willing to have a deeper look at themselves; knowing that Christ's forgiveness trumps all differences, regardless size, shape or manner.

For both Matthew Levy, the former tax collector, and for those around him who shared their love of Jesus, they were both comforted and coaxed by the message and ministry that Jesus shared with them, and that through his Spirit continued to nurture and inspire. They were allowed to go deeper in their conversations by their full awareness of Christ's

unconditional love. They were better able to admit and accept their own faults, and to accept the faults of others as well. Taking the log out of their own eye, they were able to accept others; Romans, pagans, Greeks, Macedonians, all who called Jesus Lord.

Step four of the Twelve Steps is all about seeing your own life and the lives of others with eyes of forgiveness; so you can stop accusing, blaming or denying- and thus stop displacing the problem. If the eye is the lamp of the body, it is best to keep it wiped clean, crystal clear to let God's light shine in to do its illuminating work.

Jesus' famous words about healthy eyes, allowing the light to shine in, strikes me as particularly important in this summer time of change. With the news lately bringing us wave after wave of signs of change and cultural shifts, asking for a response; from Freddie Gray to Charleston, to the latest Supreme Court decisions, it is a task to digest them, much less respond effectively and meaningfully. We may not know where to start with it all.

Well, let me suggest something counterintuitive to you; that, as Richard Rohr puts it: a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves may be the right next step to take.

For as he shares, people only come to the next steps of their journey in life through intentional struggles with contradictions, conflicts, inconsistencies, inner conflicts and what the Biblical tradition calls "sin", or moral failure.

Confession is another word we use for it in church. For the fact is that though we may indeed be very good people, none of us are perfect (to use the metaphor for today- none of us has perfect vision) and it is even more true that none of our efforts can satisfy the expectations that were placed on us (or that we place on ourselves.) We are most likely our harshest judges; more self-critical of ourselves than others are about us.

Only love allows us to go forward; love for ourselves, to begin with. In order for us to be freed to live the lives God intends for us, and not to relapse into denial, repeating history, not learning from our mistakes, we need eyes wide open, 20-20 vision of who we are and whose we are.

A model of what this looks like came to me in one of my other summer reading books, in Belden Lane's "Backpacking with the Saints." (He is a Presbyterian Professor of Theology at St. Louis University who loves hiking in the Ozarks.) He describes the brief but powerful life of a young 19th Century Carmelite nun, Therese of Liseaux, who discovered in her own inner journey a message for all of us living in this pivotal time.

Therese was one of five children, all daughters, born to her parents who both themselves had wished to enter Holy Orders, but who both had been turned down by the communities to which they applied. Her parents had hoped that one of their daughters would become a saint. Therese was the youngest; a small and frail child with a feisty spirit.

She tells a revealing story of herself in her autobiography. When she was four years old, her older sister Leonine had offer her and her sister Celine a basket of hand me down dolls and doll clothes.

Celine chose a ball of yarn from the basket, that was all, and was content with it, happy with her simple choice. Therese then chose the remainder of the basket, all of it, announcing "I choose everything!"

She explained that she never wanted to do anything half-heartedly; she didn't want to live a life of measured increments- to be 'half-a-saint'. She wanted everything that God handed her in her life. She was fully prepared to suffer anything for God's sake.

Later in life, when faced with disappointments, including not being able to enter the convent at an earlier age than others, she gradually began to accept that “being little” was enough. She came to see that she was loved for herself alone, just as she was, and spawned the coining of her “Little Way” and with it, found great relief that her life needn’t be grandiose to be significant.

As she wrote, metaphorically, “the splendor of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not rob the little violet of its scent, nor the daisy of its simple charm. If every flower wanted to be a rose, spring would lose its loveliness.”

Therese’s firm faith was taxed and honed, and was made especially apparent in the last few months of her life when she was stricken with tuberculosis and plagued by loneliness and pain. She then wrote, “I am perfectly happy to be nobody to God, if that is my holy calling. "God doesn't look so much at the greatness of our actions, nor even at their difficulty, but at the love with which we do them. We need only to love...and accept being loved.”

She died in 1897, at the age of 24, having lived the “Little Way”, ever faithful to her calling, never waning, and was canonized, far ahead of schedule, in 1925. What Therese possessed, relevant for us today, was 20-20, eagle-eye vision of God’s purpose for her.

She begrudged no one their place as a beloved child of God, and held fast to her particular calling. She was quick to learn from others and was even faster to correct her own ways. She knew God as love, for herself and for others; of all shapes and sizes, talents and callings.

Like Matthew, our former Tax Collector of ill-repute, made good by Jesus’ embrace and care, Therese lived a life illumined by God’s guiding light. Like Matthew’s church (or better said, Christ’s church, with Matthew in it)- the gold standard was love, which

trumped evil and declared all equals in God's eyes, slave and free, rich and poor, Jew, Greek, men and women alike. God is love, and anything short of love is not of God.

Perhaps we can't make history ourselves, but we can be guided by that same guiding light that led Therese and Matthew to make a small difference to others. And in the end, that's all that counts in God's eyes. In Jesus' name. Amen.