

Being Fully Alive

Sermon by Susan Flanders, Oct. 22, 2006

Hebrews 4:12-16, Mark 10:35-45

A long time ago, back in the 2nd century, a bishop in France, Irenaeus, said this: “The glory of God is man fully alive.”

Whether he meant the individual person, or mankind, or whether he was actually speaking about Jesus, as the one person most fully alive, I don’t know. I do know that the possibility of being fully alive appeals mightily to me. I embrace it eagerly, even though I’m not sure what it entails, and I suspect many of us wonder from time to time, what it is to be fully alive.

Maybe we’re talking about great moments – peak experiences as they used to say. Times like the night last summer when I lay on my back on a Cape Cod beach. It was magnificently clear, and I looked up at all the billions of stars we usually don’t see. With me were Bill’s daughter and two of his granddaughters. The girls were holding my hands as we lay there near the water’s edge. It was our last night, and life was so sweet, so precious, I felt lucky, and yes, fully alive – to the huge creation, to my new family, to myself and to God.

Great moments – and they do come, I venture, to all of us – though in all kinds of different ways – usually fleeting, but remembered for their joy and power. But being fully alive must be more than that – after all – these kinds of experiences are the exception rather than the norm.

Aren’t we talking about a way of being, a way of living in the daily-ness of things that seems really connected really awake to all of life’s rhythms? Something more like the mindfulness of the Buddhist path – accepting, open, fully present? This sounds so good, given how busy and distracted and overburdened we can be with the chores and demands, the stress and worry of our lives.

Maybe I like the idea of being fully alive because it suggests ongoing happiness and satisfaction, freedom from care and a continuing sense of God’s goodness. Sadly, and we all know it – that is wrong. Being fully alive offers much, much more, for better and for worse. Listen to what Morris West writes in his novel *The Shoes of the Fisherman*: “It takes so much to be a full human being that there are very few who have the enlightenment or the courage to pay the price. One has to abandon altogether the search for security and reach out to the risk of living with both arms. One has to embrace the world like a lover. One has to accept pain as a condition of existence. One has to court doubt and darkness as the cost of knowing. One needs a will stubborn in conflict, but apt always to total acceptance of living and dying”.

This is daunting – maybe being fully alive is too much to bear. Maybe Jesus is the only person who could ever do this – could any of the rest of us? Would we even want to?

This morning's readings seem to point to these questions about what it might mean to be fully alive. First, from Hebrews: the two-edged sword, living and active, that is God's word piercing and cutting its way into our hearts, breaking us open, laying us out before God. It's a fierce metaphor of testing and trying. In wanting to open ourselves to that living and active word of God, wanting to know and be known, to love and be loved, we put ourselves at risk. Because, what if we're not good enough, not up to it? Often a two-edged sword is something to be feared. But marriages fail, friendships die, politics and culture become superficial, devoid of depth and meaning when all we want to do is look good, be a success, protect ourselves from hurt. "The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword". It cuts, digs into us, disturbs us in our complacency. It's like this poem from the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai:

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the Spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.
But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plough.

Being fully alive means being stirred up, allowing doubt to trouble us, not settling for the way things are.

In the gospel, we have the disciples jockeying for position and power – bold enough to think they can have it all – attain the status of Jesus, drink his cup, share his baptism. They're not thinking about fullness of life in terms of serving, of sacrifice, and certainly not crucifixion!

But that is what Jesus offers. The cup – symbol of his very life-blood poured out. Baptism into the Holy Spirit and into forgiveness which is really the only remedy for sin. And Jesus offers serving rather than being served as the way to live fully.

What might that mean for us in more concrete, less symbolic terms? How might following Jesus in these way bring us fully alive? How might his teachings be good news for us and not punishing law?

We pour ourselves out when we engage fully – I our work, in our relationship, in our playing. We pour ourselves out when we try to do the very best we can at the work we are given to do, knowing we may not achieve every goal, but willing to aim high and offer our best.

We pour ourselves out to each other when we listen and really hear, putting ourselves in another's shoes to examine things their way. We pour ourselves out when we speak honestly from our hearts about what we really feel, but do so with kindness – because just as God's word can be a two-edged sword, so can our own words.

We pour ourselves out in play when we allow ourselves the time and openness to fun and joy and newness – re-creation in the true sense.

The baptism Jesus offers is nothing short of Holy Spirit – moving within and among us, working in ways we may not expect or even think possible – especially in the gift of forgiveness. For most of us, that does not come easily. Sometimes it doesn't seem to come at all, even if we say the words. But when it does, and we can find it in ourselves to forgive or accept forgiveness sincerely - this is a gift of grace, a gift of the Holy Spirit – worth praying for.

And finally, servanthood. It sounds onerous, draining, subordinating ourselves to others' needs, and often times it is. But I bet there's not one of us here who can't think of a time when you really did give yourself in service and discovered to your surprise how wonderful that felt.

I remember leaving our house reluctantly one Christmas afternoon. My boys were young, and the day was full of their excitement, the gifts, the dinner to come. I left to visit Kay Kerwood, a St. Patrick's parishioner with serious cancer, spending her Christmas at Sibley Hospital. She had been very good to me – I was the seminarian, and she had shown me a lot about faith and courage in the face of death. She was so glad to see me – she hadn't expected it, and I know it made a difference. During the long drive home, sacred Christmas music on the radio, I felt the most joyful of the whole season – free, and glad to be alive and connected with my friend. What an odd reaction to this visit with someone facing death on Christmas!

The point of the visit, of course, was to comfort and cheer my friend. We're called to serve because it's needed; it's part of how we love our neighbors – by attending to their wounds and needs. But the added blessing was the unexpected joy I felt in that hour – the best of the whole day. At least sometimes, servanthood can bring us fully alive, and I'd like to think that the more we practice, the more we'll find it to be true.

These are some ways of thinking about what it means to be fully alive, but here are some final words about it from Howard Thurman, the great Christian educator and civil rights prophet who died in 1981. He suggests we need to start with ourselves: “Don't ask what the world needs. Rather ask – what makes you come alive? Then go and do it! Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” Amen