

*Finding Our Way Home*

Our Bible 101 class got off to a great start this past week. We have 21 people coming – which is amazing! We began by having folks share their feelings about the Bible. People spoke quite honestly, and it quickly became obvious that we progressive Christians have a lot of mixed feelings about the Bible! Lots of misgivings.

Nevertheless, people seemed highly engaged in the class, and my hope is that we will learn a few things, become better acquainted and thus, more comfortable, with this book, this sacred text, that lies – not only at the heart of our faith – but also at the very core of Western Civilization.

Several weeks ago, our beloved brother, Tim Boeve, came home from Mexico for his daughter's wedding; and he preached for us that Sunday, which was great. He spoke about freedom, and how "the truth shall make you free." And Tim shared with us his own long struggle to figure out what truth is.

It was a wonderful service; but I have to tell you that, for me, what was most memorable about that service, what moved me most deeply, was a song that Curran sang, a very poignant song, called, "Oh, my wings." "Oh, my wings. I long for freedom. And my heart nearly flies, but my feet are like anchors. They refuse to leave the ground. Oh, oh, my wings."

I found this so moving because I think that this yearning speaks to a hunger that we all feel at times. We long to find our wings and fly; we yearn for something more, something deeper. We see so much conflict and sorrow and mistreatment of our fellow human beings. We hunger for a better world, a more just society, and better care of the earth. Thus, we long for an end to the pain that we carry, inside us, as well as what we see around us.

Dorothee Soelle is a German theologian whom I heard speak some years ago. She says that our pain, our yearning, our hunger for wholeness, is essential to our own well-being, and also essential to the future of the world. Soelle argues that the pain that we feel, our longing for grace and peace in our own souls as well as in the world is, in fact, the most precious treasure that we possess. "Oh, my wings..." And then she quotes the marvelous Danish author Karen Blixen, who wrote *Babette's Feast* and *Out of Africa*: Blixen writes, "Blessed are the homesick, for they shall find their way home."

Today's scripture lesson, which Cathy read to us from the Gospel of Mark, is a familiar story that appears three times in the Gospels. It is often referred to as the story of the Rich Young Ruler, whose wealth apparently stands in the way of the deeper spirituality that he seeks. As Jesus puts it, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God."

No doubt there is a rich storehouse of sermons here about how our possessions and our financial security get in the way of our faith – and I'm pretty sure I have preached a few of those sermons myself over the years!

But when I read the passage this time, I was struck by something quite different. Maybe it's because the fires were just a year ago, and so the saying, "The love in the air is thicker than the smoke" is top of mind. Or maybe it's because of that gorgeous red sculpture out on the plaza: 6 feet high and 20 feet wide, boldly proclaiming "LOVE" to the world.

Whatever the reason, what jumped right out at me in today's Bible story is the word "love." Verse 21 says that Jesus looked at the man, and loved him. And what's remarkable about this (I did a little research) is that this is the only place in the synoptic gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke - this is the only place we are told that Jesus loved somebody.

Now, of course, Jesus demonstrates his love and compassion over and over, as he heals people, and he defends women are being persecuted. But this is the only place where we are actually told that Jesus loved someone.

Which begs the question: Why? What was there about this fellow that touched Jesus so deeply?

After all, the rich young man is usually portrayed quite negatively, as someone who doesn't get it. But think about it. He comes to Jesus as a seeker, knowing that even though he's done everything right, been a good religious person, followed all the rules, and besides all that he's a person of wealth and status in the society; still, he comes to Jesus, and he kneels in front of him, and says, "Good teacher, what must I do?" What am I missing? I yearn for so much more." "Oh, my wings..."

The artwork on the front cover of the bulletin today is a lovely painting of a young woman, done by a Ukrainian artist. I chose it because the expression on her face causes me think of that young man who knelt before Jesus: so earnest and so full of hope that Jesus would be able to help him find the deeper meaning of life.

You see, I think that's what Jesus sees in this man, and it's why he loves him: because he senses in him this deep yearning, this hunger to find his true spiritual home.

Now, I mention Dorothee Soelle today because she is someone who is deeply worried about us First World Christians, and about our lack of yearning, and what she perceives is the absence of a hunger for a better world. She wrote a book called *Death by Bread Alone*. Death by bread alone. She says this phrase describes us: that while we are comfortable and content, we are not fully alive.

We are anesthetized, she says, by the comfortable lives we lead, by all the busyness we create, and by all the goods and the services we consume. And so, as our world slides toward ecological disaster or nuclear extinction, we feel helpless to do anything about it.

Now, the solution that Soelle offers us is, well, it's religion. It's a deeper spirituality. Which may not seem like a surprise to you, since she is a theologian, after all - but it certainly was to her! She speaks as one of us; that is, we modern, theologically-liberal, well-educated Christians - who seem to have left the deep spiritual quest behind. Very often, in our reasonable, thoughtful, dispassionate way, we have assumed that this is not really necessary for us. But she has come to see how vital it is to have a deeper walk with God - whatever that looks like for you.

However, Dr. Soelle also wants to remind us that the inward journey is not enough. What she calls "the religion of yearning" is not sufficient. The rich young man in our story, for example, was searching, he was hungry, he was asking the right questions. But, in the end, he wasn't able to follow through. Having good intentions, yearning for a better world, feeling compassion for those who suffer, being on the "right side" on the issues, being incensed by the arrogance and insensitivity of our political leaders: these are all good things; but they are not enough.

Indeed, Soelle states that, for followers of Jesus, the pathway home inevitably leads to action. All our good intentions must cause us to step up, and get involved. We must

show courage, and make sacrifices, for the sake of justice and righteousness. We must discover and claim our own power, by the grace of God, to make a difference in this world.

Susan and I recently watched one of our favorite movies, on Netflix, called, *Chocolat*. It's a delightful movie that's set in a small French village in the 1950's. This is a town where everybody knows their place, and everybody knows just what they are supposed to do – and, what they are not supposed to do. The mayor of the village – Count Reynaud – is very controlling; he even controls what the young priest is allowed to say in the pulpit. For Count Reynaud, religion is all about following the rules, and self-denial.

But then, one windy day in the early spring, a mysterious young woman and her daughter come to town, and they open up a chocolate shop. Which is scandalous – because it's right in the midst of the Lent, a season defined by self-denial. However, a few people try the marvelous chocolates that the woman produces; and these chocolates, it seems, have mysterious powers. And so it begins. Bit by bit, the whole village is turned upside down.

Now, on the surface, the movie may seem anti-religious, for it certainly pokes fun at the strict religion that the Count attempts to enforce. However, I see this as a deeply spiritual movie; for it demonstrates that true religion is not about the rules you follow; instead, it's about the love that you show; it's about the kind of transformation that love can bring.

The village as it turns out, is full of pain; that is, it's full of people who yearn to fly, but who have spent years anchored to the ground. There's the abused and timid woman who eats one of these magical chocolates and finds her courage, and stands up and reclaims her life; there's the hopeless drunk who eats a chocolate and rediscovers, first his lust (!), and then his love, for his wife, and he completely turns his life around; there's a crotchety old woman (played by Judi Dench) who is dying, but then finds a way to live joyfully and fully right to the end; the young priest who finds religion; and, even the chocolatier herself who ends up finding her wings.

Again and again in this movie we find people who are filled with longing, who yearn for more, and who then find the courage and the strength to find their wings.

Now, I'm not sure what kind of yearning might be in your soul these days. I'm not sure what pain you may be carrying, for yourself, or for your loved ones; for America, for our planet, for the state of the world, or for all those who are vulnerable and who are suffering.

I don't know what is on your heart. But I urge you to be in touch with that pain and that hunger, and to not let yourself be anesthetized by all the busyness of our lives, and our many possessions, or our wonderful travel experiences, or our comfortable, enviable lives here in our lovely little town of Sonoma.

You and I must resist the temptation toward complacency. Like the rich young man who knelt before Jesus, we must stay hungry and uncomfortable, and actively searching for our true home.

But, unlike that young man, we must find the courage to follow through, to act, to find a way to make a difference, and to find our way home. Blessed are the homesick, for they shall find their way home.

The world is full of worthy causes. There are oh, so many places that call to us to be involved. And make no mistake, when you show up, it matters, because anytime you get involved, you bring hope with you, and new possibility.

So, I urge you, to listen to your pain, your yearning, and then somehow find your wings, and find a way bring hope, and make a difference.

Now, before I close today, my friends, I do need to say that there is one place, once cause, which is heavy on my heart today and about which I am feeling deep concern; and so, I'm going to take this opportunity to personally urge you to act, to step up and help to bring goodness and create hope. And, it's a place where you really can make a difference.

Because that cause, that place, is right here: our little church.

We share so many blessings together; so many good things: our beloved church family, our beautiful sanctuary and well-used campus, our amazing pastor and our church staff, as well as our shared commitment to care for the earth and to care for the most vulnerable among us.

However, our sturdy little church is facing hard times. Some might even call it an existential crisis. You see, we need to increase our pledges by nearly 20% this year, in order to care for our buildings and grounds, and so that we can do the things that we have said we want to do together.

It's a big ask; I know we can do it, but only if we all step up. And you will hear much more about it in the coming weeks.

In addition, as Church Council member, I can tell you part of the reason we are having an all-church discussion today is because not enough of us are inclined to accept responsibility for the on-going tasks and the leadership that are required to keep our little ship afloat. Therefore, we who are in leadership right now need your guidance in figuring out what to do about that.

Dear friends, for many of us, this church is our spiritual home on this earth. We look around us and we see people whom we love, and whose lives we share. But we also look around, and we realize that Ev is no longer here, to care for this campus, as he did so lovingly for so long. And Rudy is no longer here. And Lori is no longer here. Nor are dozens and dozens of wonderful, faithful people who came before us and who have loved this place, and cared for it, and cared for our church family, down through the years.

So now, it is up to us, you and me, to do more than just yearn for the old days, or yearn for a few more new members to carry the load; but instead to step up, to take action that will bring goodness and create hope; and that will, in some small way, help to usher in God's kingdom of love and peace, and a world – a far better world - of justice and joy.

Blessed indeed are the homesick, for they are the ones who will find their way home. Amen.