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June 26, 2011

I Cor. 10:16-17

John 6:51-58

Honest Faith

One of the most important lessons I have learned from being a volunteer at Zen hospice is to be honest, especially to be honest when someone is dying. I have been with people as they die when their friends and loved ones visit and are unable to say goodbye. They might say "See you again tomorrow." They often say, "I love you." And then tag on "I'll visit you again." It's an unconscious reaction to protect themselves from their own sadness--even anguish-- at the imminent death of their beloved.

Yes, denial as a protective reaction can be strong at the bedside of someone who is dying.

It can feel overwhelming and threatening to be honest in those moments and say "good bye." And yet as volunteers trained with Zen Buddhist precepts that is what we are taught to be: honest.

So in all honesty, I'll shed my usual protective armor of historical analysis and admit that I find our readings shocking. [and from the comments I got from the staff this past week, I think others around here also were pretty shocked]. Someone in charge of writing up the bulletin called me up and asked me, "So Darleen, how're those readings workin' for you?" and when I saw the bulletin with the readings emailed out ahead of time to the parish I noticed the rather

significant warning before the readings: It felt like it read something like: “Warning, These readings are very graphic.”

I don't honestly know what Jesus intended to mean with these words. Except probably to shock his Jewish audience out of the complacency of their tradition into the present moment; the raw, fresh, electrically charged NOW when preconceived notions and teachings no longer function. I can easily imagine the Jews listening to him looking at each other while he said these words, with eye brows raised; concern registering on their forehead; and disbelief on their mouths. What? You want us to eat your flesh? It must have been humbling as well as exciting to have heard Jesus say these words and not know exactly what he was talking about.

If we really take the time to listen to them as if for the first time, Jesus's words can bring us to that same electric moment. But most of us need to un-train ourselves from reacting to these words. And that isn't easy to do since we live in a pretty reactive culture.

Today's Gospel is a good one to test ourselves on.

Did any of you have a gut reaction to this?

In the Gospel the Jews reacted by disputing over the meaning of eating Jesus' flesh. They argued over his words...a reaction.

Through the centuries various theological and devotional practices have developed in order to modify our reactions to this text. But these too have led to disputes.

In the Catholic faith, the texts have been solemnized. Today is called the solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, a day which traditionally was commemorated by an entire

community making a pilgrimage of sorts, or a procession from one church to the next in order to gaze on the Eucharistic...that, is to use sight as a form of prayerful meditation, from one church to the next throughout the city. The belief was that by gazing on the body of Christ, they could bring Jesus' body into their own. Over the centuries this has changed into physical eating of the bread and wine which Catholics believe to truly be the real body and real blood of Christ.

Some non-catholics scoff at such a belief and practice, even saying that Catholics are not real Christians....a reaction.

Protestant thinkers have turned this and similar gospel texts into a metaphor. Some reformation thinkers found passages like this untenable in a literal sense, and insisted (i.e. reacted) that Jesus intended to speak metaphorically: the bread and wine are symbolic of the body and blood of Christ and Communion is a commemoration of the Last Supper. Swedenborg himself wrote that that the Lord's flesh and the bread mean the divine good of Jesus' love, also all good of charity; and the Lord's blood and the wine mean the divine truth of his wisdom, also all truth of faith; and eating means appropriation." (True Christian Religion 701, 2.) He stood away from the visceral physical meaning and created a metaphorical meaning.

Some people scoff at Swedenborg's convoluted understanding of correspondences and their metaphorical interpretations of Scripture. A catholic I know once told me "Swedenborg is no Christian. I won't engage in conversation about him." His face turned red as he said this....a reaction.

Isn't it fascinating how we react to a text?

It's fascinating to become aware that our reactions are somehow protecting us from some deeper raw nerve that we may not be aware of.

I'd like to explore this issue of reactivity a bit more since we do live in a highly reactive culture in our political life, our religious life, and certainly on the roads and freeways.

Also reactive behavior is on my mind a lot right now since a week ago my husband and I adopted a dog—Gioco, means “Game” in Italian. He's a sweet little terrier who was at the SPCA.

After we showed interest in him, the volunteer offered in a low voice, “There's something you should know about him.” Then she told us in a casual way how he can be reactive to other small dogs when they're on a leash. It sounded like an interesting challenge; and every rescue dog has some issue right?

When I went back to fill out all the adoption papers, I got a more thorough description of the condition. Two hours worth of discussion and related paper work.

Now that we have him home...the reality of the situation is becoming more apparent and his reactivity isn't limited to small dogs on leashes! He reacts to

Cats

Dogs: big, small, on leash, off leash

Doves

At first his little 17lb body becomes tense. His eyes engage with a piercing stare on his target. If we're lucky, we can call his name at this moment and distract him. For this he gets a treat. But often he can't hear us, he's so focused on his target. He can't see us, he's so focused on his target.

At this point he growls, lunges, he barks. He reacts in a way that I don't recognize him as our little Gioco who curls up with me in my chair and while I read. He reacts in a way that can be irritating and annoying to us (I admit, I react to his reactivity). He reacts in a way that takes the fun out of the simple pleasure of taking a walk.

He acts like this ultimately out of fear: fear of getting hurt. In his case, it appears that he probably has been hurt and possibly abused. Some reactive behaviors have become habitual like when he cowers around running water. Running water seems perfectly harmless to us, but to him, he fears it. And he seems to have been a stray at one time since his reactive behavior toward other animals is all about self-defense.

The job that Scott and I have is to first of all stop our own reacting to his reactions, and then to shock and distract Gioco out of his habitual reactive behavior. We do this by make strange noises that sound bizarre, all in order to release his tension so he can move on and discover a new way of life free from pressure, free from anxiety, free from pain.

With all due respect it's a little like Jesus did with the Jews. He shocked them and distracted them with his new understanding of the bread and the wine,

In addition I wonder if we have become desensitized to his shocking tactics and may have settled into our own preferred interpretations. Maybe we need to be more like Gioco and go through retraining?

But I can't help thinking that Gioco is a lot like us. When facing differing ideas, beliefs, practices, sometimes we can become reactive rather than reflective. We humans might become reactive in our reflection, trying to cover up or tone down a raw reality. And yet we always have the opportunity to retrain ourselves to open up the possibilities of understanding.

Is it possible to hold a range of interpretations and understandings of our Gospel today together at the same time. Or do we insist on one in particular?

Viral Mehta, who is the co-founder of CharityFocus.org, recently wrote a piece picked up by the Huffington Post entitled, "Why is Humility so Underrated?" His essay began with this statement: "Insight often arises from simultaneously holding two seemingly contradictory notions -- and then allowing a deeper understanding to develop" And he concludes with this truism: "Perhaps [...] what humility really comes down to – [is] space around our perception of the world, as well as our own selves. Space to hold conflicting information, take in other people's views ...Humility gives us permission to withhold conclusion and realize that what we are is always still emerging. And this is good." This sense of humility seems to me to be at the basis or the core of an honest faith.

I wonder if we can refrain from reaction and allow the words of Jesus, telling his listeners to eat his flesh and drink his blood to be fully present without quick interpretation; with humility to offer space and breath. And to wonder, really wonder at what Jesus meant?

Next week you celebrate communion with your newly chosen pastor, Rev. Junchol Lee. You begin a new chapter in your life together as a parish. I invite you to wonder deeply and broadly as you share the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ together once again and for the first time. And in that moment be open to the new meanings you experience together.