

Letting Go

When Lori and I first started dating, her mother wouldn't agree to meet me for nearly a year. I was going through a rocky divorce and I was well known (some would say infamous!) in the small town of Decorah for bucking the system by homeschooling our children. Lori's mother was concerned about "what will they think."

Her reaction seems rather old fashioned in retrospect, but it reflects the kind of thinking that lies behind much of how public opinion works, especially in small towns.

While every society needs clear laws and moral principles, the informal court of public opinion plays a role as well. But oh how this "court" can prevent good things sometimes. For example, look at our Gospel reading for this morning. Jesus isn't breaking any laws when he sits down with taxpayers and sinners, but he's clearly not following propriety. "What would they think?" doesn't seem to cross his mind.

Who would we today judge that Jesus shouldn't associate with? Lawyers (sorry John, Julia and Philip!)? Politicians? MAGA followers with red hats? Super-rich people? And "sinners." Isn't that a wonderful

wide-open category that would allow us to condemn him for dining with almost anyone we didn't favor? After all, who's not a sinner!?

It makes me think of when I worked at Kirkwood in Cedar Rapids and a friend and I coaxed a colleague to go to the gym with us. He wasn't against working out, but he had a useful avoidance response whenever we introduced him to a new exercise: "I've never done that before."

How often have we failed to make moral or spiritual progress with a similar response? "I'm not the kind of person who is into meditation." Or "I don't like to socialize with someone who has those views" or "...someone who is into that fashion" or "...someone from such a different culture"?

Customs, traditions, habits, learned responses, public opinion...patterns that serve us well, that help us make sense of the world and know how to behave in it. We couldn't do without such attitudes and behaviors. Except when we should.

Let's look for a moment at the second example in Matthew's gospel for today. Both stories are also about propriety, but let's look at them from the point of view of the man from the synagogue and the

woman who touched Jesus' garment. Both of them went against social norms at significant risks of shame or condemnation.

In responding to these stories, I'm going to follow Dorothy Whiston's example, who last week introduced us to a powerful poem by Steve Garness-Holmes. My poet of choice is Mark Nepo, who writes about risk-taking and suffering in his poem "The Life After Tears."

In the life before tears
there are endless plans
and we avoid the difficult
feelings at all cost, as if grief,
pain, and loss are canyons
we'll never climb out of.

But, then, one day, while
not looking, someone dear
dies, or a dream breaks like
a plate, and our world, as
we've known it, is blown
apart.

Then, we discover that
falling in the canyon is
our initiation, and
the river at the bottom is the only water that
will keep us alive.

I wish it were different.
but the reward for being
hollowed out is that the

song then sings us.

In nearly every corner of our lives, we are often faced with the choice of trying to control or to let go. In the Gospel reading, the woman had suffered with bleeding for a dozen years. She was so desperate for help that she broke a strong social taboo that forbid a menstruating woman from touching a man, especially a renowned rabbi like Jesus. Her faith, desperation and hope were so strong that she was able to let go of her shame and the taboo to touch the edge of Jesus' garment.

In a most moving scene, Jesus stops, searches for the person of desperate desire and courage, and he blesses her. By his example, we see that sometimes winning comes through suffering and defeat.

The leader of the temple has also fallen into this trough of despair. His daughter has died, and like the bleeding woman he is beyond desperation. In that state he is open to the possibility that Jesus can perform another miracle. To do this he has to let go of temple protocol by seeking out a non-sanctioned healer.

His faith, like the woman's, brought the healing he desperately desired. Neither of their faiths was about doctrine or theological

beliefs. It was much more like the idea of trusting our gut, of the wisdom built into our bodies that lies below our rationality.

Let me elaborate. Recently I was fixing an appliance and I grew increasingly frustrated with my inability to put it back together. I had all the parts and it was a relatively simple fix. But I just couldn't make it work. Rather than say a few choice words like I too often do, I took a step back and inhaled deeply. And miraculously, the problem seemed to solve itself.

Have you ever had a similar experience? Perhaps you can't remember a word and the harder you try the only result is increased frustration, even anger. Then you relax and quit trying, and voila--the word appears. Or perhaps you have that common experience as we grow older of not being able to remember why you entered a room. The more you "squeeze your brain," the less likely you are to realize what you were after. It's only when you let go that the word, or the memory, or the know-how appears.

Brain scientists have an explanation for at least why some of these memory losses become more frequent as our brains age. And while they can't prescribe how to fix much of what's happening

(although there are memory tricks and also memory exercises we can practice), the important lesson experientially is that we need to learn to let go and trust our brains...or our “gut.”

In our spiritual lives, this happens too, in the process called *kenosis*, or self-emptying. This is related, I think, to what pioneering psychologist Carl Jung called our “shadows.” By this he means the images and beliefs we carry with us that keep us from commitments, decisions and actions that could enhance our lives. “What would they think” is an example. Others might include “I’m too old for that,” or “people like me don’t do such things.” In some instances these unspoken inhibitions are important; but they too often keep us from something crucial, often without our even knowing they exist. They’re in the shadows.

What are your shadows? One of mine is a variety of “I’ve never done that”: “I’m not sure I want to take the risk and try something I’m likely to fail at.” Once we discover our shadows the next step is to learn to set them aside.

At the same time, we need to bear in mind that the shadows often carry some wisdom for us. If we don’t care about what others

think, we can end up being insensitive and friendships can become difficult. Knowing when and how to overcome our shadow beliefs requires discernment. And often courage. It took the bleeding woman a dozen years to work up the courage to seek the help she desired.

If you study the meditative methods of the many faith traditions, a main secret to breaking through to a deeper spiritual world is letting go. Of our ordinary perspectives, of our egos, of our desires for control. This is a challenge for all of us. But as with the woman and man in our gospel story today, life dishes up opportunities for us to dive (or fall) into these holy waters whether or not we want to.

Let me end with one more bit of wisdom from my poet de jour: “Love and suffering carry us from our small path to the big path where all life meets.” My friends, I will look for you on the “big path” where we will walk together out of our shadows.