

Everywhere You Go, There You Are

FB LIVE Worship

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A colleague and I were talking one day and she mentioned that she was celebrating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her ordination. She was reflecting on her years in ministry and mentioned that, in that time, she had served 4 different churches. "I just can't seem to find the right fit," she said. "When called to each church, I have been sure that was the one, but a few months into the call, I realize it isn't." I think I muttered something like, "I am sure you will find just the right congregation for you."

But the quote, "Everywhere you go, there you are," immediately came to mind. These words have been attributed to many people, including Confucius, but nobody knows for sure who said it first. The point is, we can go to a different place and do different things, with different people, but the common denominator in each one of our experiences is ourselves. If you have hated every job you have ever had, it may not be the jobs. If you find yourself angry every time you engage in a discussion about politics, it may not be the people you are talking to or their opinions. If you have been unable to sustain a long-term commitment with another person, it may not be the other people you've been in relationship with. "Everywhere you go, there you are."

There have been times in my life when this has been problematic because I've actually said the words, "I don't even want to be with myself." I wonder if you have ever felt this way. For me, this feeling shows up as restlessness, lack of focus, and biting sarcasm and it's never about what is going on in the moment. It's always something inside myself that is unresolved and, I have learned that until I deal with whatever that is, I am not any fun to be around, even for myself.

We don't like it, but until we come to terms with the truth, that this way of feeling has an internal locus and not an external one, we will likely attempt to deal with it by changing external things. We move from job to job, telling ourselves the last place didn't appreciate what we had to offer. We give up on intimate relationships, blaming the other person for our own inability to stay committed. We shut our friends out (they don't understand), we quit serving in our church or

other non-profits (they don't do it right). At times it seems like we are willing to change anything to feel better. Well...anything except ourselves. Running away will not help us, it will distract us for a while, but eventually we will see that our woundedness and struggle accompany us wherever we go.

Last week, I introduced you to some wisdom from the desert mothers and fathers who were early Christians who chose to leave behind society in favor of solitude. They were the first monks. Some monks went off to live completely alone, while others lived in communities where much of their time was devoted to individual prayer and meditation. Whether they lived alone in a simple hut or inhabited a single room, their living space was called the "cell." The monastic cell is central to the spirituality of the desert mothers and fathers. This outer cell, which is the actual physical space the monk inhabits, is a metaphor for the inner cell, which is the deepest, truest part of ourselves, where the real "you" or real "me" lives. And when that place is troubled or wounded, this early Christian wisdom tells us we just can't run away from it.

A brother came to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word. The old man said to him: "Go sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything."

~Moses

Go sit with yourself and you will learn everything you need to know. That's quite a departure from our "Google it" world, right? My first response to this saying was: Isn't the world in a mess because we run around thinking we know it all? This bit of wisdom can't be right. But the truth is, we don't know it all. And while we cannot sit alone and learn the ins and outs of quantum physics or organic chemistry, I wonder if we can sit with ourselves and learn about ourselves. And further, I wonder if really knowing ourselves is preferable to "knowing it all." Maybe knowing ourselves is "everything."

Sitting with ourselves is hard. When life gets unpleasant, we don't want to sit and reflect, we want to take action. And as I said before, our action is often in the form of getting away from whatever we perceive is making us feel bad. Because, well, we deserve to be happy, right?

Another desert mother or father said this:

If a trial comes upon you in the place where you live, do not leave that place when the trial comes. Wherever you go, you will find that what you are running from is there ahead of you. So, stay until the trial is over, so that if you do end up leaving, no offense will be caused, and you will not bring distress to others who live in the same neighborhood.

~Anonymous

Stay. Stay where you are.

Don't run away when you feel uncomfortable in your life and in your heart. The reality right now is there are a lot of us feeling really uncomfortable. We feel isolated and alone because of COVID-19. These weeks of being told it is dangerous to leave our homes has taken a toll on us. We can't stand to spend another moment in our houses, yet we are gripped by fear as we put on our masks and venture forth. When the experts on the news tell us that this is only the beginning and we have to get used to a new way life, running away sounds great. But there is literally nowhere to run. It is uncomfortable.

And that's not all. This nation is uncomfortable about its history and the ways in which racism has been woven into the fabric of our society. And we are very uncomfortable with the truth: It was on purpose. It is not an accident that it is easier to be white in our country than it is to be Black or brown. There are a lot of hard conversations happening about racism in our country. I've seen it on social media. I have watched as Black and brown people have spoken their truth and have shared their own experiences, only to have their white "friends" delete the conversation from Facebook and block that person from further posts.

That friends, is running away. It is also another way we who are white tell people of color that they don't matter. This is an internal "cell" thing that needs attention and no amount of deleting, sarcasm, or echo chamber conversation is going to fix it. If being told that white people benefit from the very systems that oppress Black and brown people makes you mad at the person who said it, that's on you and that is work you need to do internally, in your own cell.

I saw this kind of discomfort in another place this week. I was one of the directors of our region's virtual church camp for junior high youth. On the last day of camp, the theme was "Longing for Change." That day in their small groups, campers and counselors were talking about the ways in which people are working for change in

our world today. The counselors were cautioned to be very sensitive to the fact that these teens had come from many different places and there could be some very raw and big feelings about what is happening with regard to racial justice in our country.

At the end of camp, after the campers said good-bye, the adults stayed on the Zoom call and debriefed. When we asked the counselors how their small group went, they said the campers were very quiet that day. This had not been the norm. Previously the counselors had reported how well the campers engaged and how quickly they seemed to feel comfortable sharing with each other. The curriculum invited the adults to ask the campers to name the injustices they see around them on the news or in real life. The counselors all reported that they tried in several different ways to get the young people to talk about racism and they just wouldn't. Some of the campers didn't say anything when the subject was mentioned, others changed the subject to injustice they were more comfortable talking about, like environmental injustice. This conversation we predicted would be energized and emotional because of what is going on right now, literally went nowhere.

Afterward, when I had a chance to think about it, I realized the campers have been taught to be uncomfortable talking about racism. The adults around them, maybe including the adults in their home churches, have modeled defensiveness, changing the subject, not knowing what to say, and running away, at least metaphorically, from the discomfort, rather than engaging it. And sadly, I don't think we had enough time to help them move beyond that this week. In her book *Desert Fathers and Mothers: Early Christian Wisdom Sayings*, Christine Valtner-Paintner writes, "...the call is to not run away from conflict or difficulty in the midst of our lives. Stability and steadfastness demand that we stay with difficult experiences and stay present to the discomfort they create in us."

The time we spend alone in our "cell" helps us cultivate a new way of being when we are outside the "cell." How we are and who we are becoming on the inside should spill over into our whole lives. It is hard work. It is literally like holding a mirror to our hearts everyday with the hope of eventually being able to see the image of God looking back at us and for that image to get clearer and clearer. We can see examples in the Hebrew Bible of how our Jewish ancestors seemed to be

able to acknowledge their discomfort and pain and connect with God at the same time.

Psalms 77 is a good example of that.

I cry aloud to God,

aloud to God, that he may hear me.

<sup>2</sup>In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;

in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying;  
my soul refuses to be comforted.

<sup>3</sup>I think of God, and I moan;

I meditate, and my spirit faints.

<sup>4</sup>You keep my eyelids from closing;

I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

<sup>5</sup>I consider the days of old,

and remember the years of long ago.

<sup>6</sup>I commune with my heart in the night;

I meditate and search my spirit:

<sup>7</sup>“Will the Lord spurn forever,

and never again be favorable?

<sup>8</sup>Has his steadfast love ceased forever?

Are his promises at an end for all time?

<sup>9</sup>Has God forgotten to be gracious?

Has he in anger shut up his compassion?”

<sup>10</sup>And I say, “It is my grief

that the right hand of the Most High has changed.”

<sup>11</sup>I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;

I will remember your wonders of old.

<sup>12</sup>I will meditate on all your work,

and muse on your mighty deeds.

<sup>13</sup>Your way, O God, is holy.

What god is so great as our God?

<sup>14</sup>You are the God who works wonders;

you have displayed your might among the peoples.

<sup>15</sup>With your strong arm you redeemed your people,

the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

The language of lament expressed in this and other psalms can help us, as individuals and us, as Church, speak the truth about human experience. When we run from or suppress our discomfort, we turn our backs on what it means to be human and what it means to be in honest relationship with each other and with God. We must acknowledge our own suffering, and the suffering of other people, and deal it in our hearts first and then, in our streets.

The structure of this psalm is useful because it begins with the psalmist pouring out his pain, meditating alone, searching for God. He talks about a common human experience, doubt. We look at the enormity of the world's grief and our own grief and say, "Where are you, why have you left us alone?" But then, in verse 10, he wrote, "And I say, "It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed." The psalmist realized he had been the victim of his own despair. God had not failed him. He had failed to notice God. And he continued, in verse 11, with his own testimony about God's interaction with him and with God's people in the past, "I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds."

The psalmist only got to the place of being able to see God in his life because he was willing to face himself and how he was feeling. He was changed, not because he moved to a new town or got a new job or a younger wife, but because he was able to look in the mirror and see himself as God's beloved and proclaim God's love and mercy for himself. When we are able to do that, dear ones, we can proclaim God's love and mercy for everyone, from our hearts to the streets.

I am going to end this morning by giving you some homework. As you consume news this week, collect the headlines that trouble you. Write them down on a piece of paper and spend time reflecting on them. Think about why they trouble you. How do they challenge your view of what the world is, what the world should be, and how we should be in the world? Sit with your feelings. Understand that you are doing something even when you are taking time for reflection. The work we do on ourselves internally is a gift to ourselves, the people close to us, and ultimately, the world. Consider how you might let what's happening inside you overflow into the rest of your life. Amen.