

Sermon – Ash Wednesday, February 6, 2008 (Noon Service)

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The late Scott Peck was a psychiatrist, and best selling author in the eighties. Even though he was a fragile human being like the rest of us, he wrote profound things which are instructive for us today. I have recently re-read one of his books, *A Different Drum*. In it Peck imagines an internal dialogue in Jesus' heart, during one of the stranger, of the many strange incidents, recounted in Matthew's gospel.

The episode is found in his chapter on *Emptiness*. Peck describes emptiness as being open to listening to that which is deep within us. Open to listening for a new word. Listening for a new word beyond what we might perceive at first glance. It has to do with having a receptive heart. It has to do with being empty, open, and listening. It was the spiritual habit that Jesus practiced.

Here's the story as envisioned by Scott Peck:

Jesus was camped with his disciples near the seaport villages of Tyre and Sidon. He was "between assignments." And he was tired and in need of self-replenishment. The disciples were busying themselves with the chores. They knew to leave Jesus alone at such times.

Jesus was sitting in the sun, enjoying its warmth which was penetrating his blood. He was relishing the quiet and solitude. As always, he was resting in his relationship with God, and he was blissfully relaxed.

Suddenly, from around a little hill, a woman came running up to him. He could see by her dress that she was no Israelite but a foreigner. She was a filthy, untouchable Canaanite. Jesus recoiled in disgust. The

woman began to babble in an atrocious accent. Waves of fury filled Jesus. What right did she have to interrupt one of his few precious moments of peace? He was tempted no longer to recoil, but to jump forward... drive her away, in his rage.

But the habit of exercising emptiness won. So he turned inward. Peck imagines Jesus saying, "I'm confused. I'm feeling overwhelmed. I don't know what I am doing. I need to get away and be quiet and empty." So he turns and runs from the woman into his tent. Huddling in the far corner, Jesus asks God (whom he often called Abba), "Abba, why won't they leave me alone? Surely you don't want me to have anything to do with her, do you? But now I have asked you a question – so let me be empty and listen."

But Jesus could not hear Abba. All he could hear was the woman continuing to babble to his disciples, right outside the tent. He wished they would send her away. He listened to them trying to do that. But she refused to go away.

Finally, two of the disciples came into the tent – "We can't get rid of her Master. She won't buy the excuse that you are busy. But if you tell us to, we'll get rid of her one way or another."

Jesus looked up at them, spontaneously saying, "I was sent here just to minister to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But immediately the habit took over. "Is it true? That is why you sent me, isn't it?" There goes another question. Listen. Be empty."

"So do you want to get rid of her?" asked one of the disciples.

“Abba, am I sent here just to minister to the Israelites? Be empty. Do you really want me to minister to everyone? To anyone and everyone? Be empty. Listen.”

“Well?” The disciples pushed for an answer in the silence. But the silence continued as Jesus stayed empty. Spasms of agony passed across his face. Finally he said, “Send her in.”

The disciples looked astonished. They were dumbfounded. Irritably, Jesus says again, “I told you to send her in.” Then he thought, “All right, now I’ve done it. I’ve engaged myself. Do it decently. Be empty. Listen. Despite her accent. Listen. Be empty. Hear what she has to say.”

The flap of the tent was pulled open and the untouchable creature came in. But even as he felt like recoiling again, Jesus reminded himself again to be empty.

“Master’, said the woman, falling on her knees, “my daughter is grievously vexed with a demon. Please heal her, please.”

“Oh God, another case of possession,” Jesus thought. “I don’t have the energy. I’m so tired, Abba. And now you give me a Canaanite demon to boot. But be empty. It’s a child, after all. The poor child. Still, it’s a Canaanite child. I can’t be responsible for the whole world.”

“It’s not right,” Jesus said to the woman, laying upon her the full strength of the negative side of his ambivalence, “to take food meant for the children and cast it to dogs.” But even as he finished speaking, the habit took over and he again turned inward. “That was not necessarily fair, and hardly kind, he thought. Be empty. Listen to the woman. Forget her clothes. Penetrate her accent. Be open and empty and listen.”

“True master,” the woman said, “but even the dogs are fit to eat the crumbs that fall from the children’s table.”

Tears filled Jesus’ eyes. “The humility,” he thought, “my God, the humility. I could never deny myself to anyone so humble. Would that the Israelites could be so humble. You’ve taught me again, Abba. You used this woman to do it, didn’t you? I am meant for the whole world.”

The tears still in his eyes, the love poured out of Jesus. “Oh, woman,” he exclaimed with joy, “great is your faith. Be it unto you this moment as you will.”

This incident casts light on what it means to follow Jesus – not toward perfection, but toward an ever greater openness to the living God who calls us beyond our limited vision and our narrow perception of the world.

This story is really all about prayer. J. Philip Newell, who was with us here at the Cathedral this past weekend, reminds us that “prayer is about being still and aware at an inner level of the One who is closer to us than we are to ourselves. It is an attentiveness to the Life that is at the heart of all life.

The theme of repentance in Lent is a call to return to what is deepest in us. The essence of repentance is not about turning away from ourselves, but about returning to ourselves – to be lead by Christ to the goodness and beauty that lie at the center of who we are.

The spiritual practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, clarified by Jesus in today’s Gospel reading, are tools to draw us closer to God. Seeking external recognition for doing these things is a fool’s errand. Instead, Jesus is calling us to a deeper place of living. A place of

emptiness and listening. Of opening our hearts to hear the prompting of Abba deep within us.

Today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of the season of Lent. The twentieth century spiritual giant, Thomas Merton, reminds us that the cross of ashes, to be traced on our foreheads in a few minutes, is not only a reminder of our death, but a pledge of resurrection – that we are forever enfolded in the loving arms of God. Knowing these things, gives us courage to engage in the deep prayer of Lent – to enter into emptiness, and listen.