

Sermon: On Losing and Gaining

- John Caldwell, November 6, 2011

From very early on, there have been parts of the teachings of Jesus that I found very difficult. That should come as no surprise as people are still disagreeing over translations and meanings today.

One point that was particularly confusing was the statement, "The one who would cling to his life will lose it, and the one who loses his life for my sake will gain it." By the way, where many of the statements that Jesus is reported to have said appear in only one or two of the gospels, this teaching appears in all of them, sometimes twice.) This has a certain similarity to, "Take up the cross, and follow me." It almost sounds like Jesus is telling us we are going to have to physically leave this world in order to be his followers and to put his teachings into practice.

The last time I shared my story with the congregation I mentioned that at one time in my life I had reached the point where I insisted, demanded, that life make sense. That was a time when it seemed that life, the human part of it, made almost no sense to me. I then expected, or at least hoped, that life would guide me to the resources and experiences that would make it possible to understand this world and my place in it. To my way of thinking, that did happen a number of times. The most dramatic example of that kind of guidance occurred in April of 1973 when I began breaking out in hives and, about 10 days later, happened to pick up a copy of Arthur Janov's book, *The Primal Scream*. That book gave me not only the understanding I was looking for but also the way to overcome the hives problem. It seemed that the whole situation had been organized so that I could make the fastest and the most complete progress possible toward the goal that I had set for myself, considering that I did not have the money to pay for primal therapy.

I realize that this could be passed off as a "coincidence," and therefore would have been meaningless, but I choose to believe otherwise. In fact, in a world where "what we sow we reap," there very well might be no such things as coincidences. So, I take seriously the things that come to me, especially when I have been asking for, searching for, demanding those things. The fact that Janov's writings made many of the teachings of Jesus understandable, for me at least, gives even more power to my feeling that this is a big part of the guidance that I was hoping for.

It was more than interesting when, a few years ago, I found a book called *Open Mind, Open Heart*, by Thomas Keating, a Cistercian priest, monk and abbot. A lot of the book sounded like a reiteration of Janov's writings. He talked about the huge reservoir of pain that we all seem to carry around in our subconscious. He said that this emotional "junk" is physically harmful and that we need to get rid of it. Of course, the whole discussion was from the point of view of - and his experience with - contemplative prayer (aka centering prayer or silent meditation). One of the most interesting parts of the work was his discussion of what he called the "false self" and the "true Self." It seems that we naturally construct a mask or an appearance that allows us to fit into a fallen, broken human world. I would call that mask our "personality". This new person that we are forced to construct is part of the defense system that helps us to escape from the effects of the emotional pain we encounter as we grow up. But this mask is also like a shell, it limits us badly and, even though it makes it possible for children to continue living in the face of catastrophic, that is to say lethal, pain, it is enormously destructive and eventually brings our lives to an end, often very painfully.

The "true Self" Keating calls "Our basic core of goodness". It is our essential nature, the most fundamental part of us. He says a number of things about it, one of the most interesting of which is "This basic core of goodness is capable of unlimited development; indeed, of becoming transformed into Christ and deified." Another statement that I found terribly interesting is, "God and our true Self are not separate. Though we are not God, God and our true Self are the same thing."

On the other hand, Keating's comments on the false self include the term "original sin" which he says is not anything we have done wrong personally, but is the "human condition" and is the experience of growing to mature rationality without a perceived connection to God. He states, "This gives rise to our intimate sense of incompleteness, isolation, and guilt." I will include two other statements he makes that I would like to quote in their entirety:

The particular consequences of original sin include all the self-serving habits that have been woven into our personality from the time we were conceived; all the emotional damage that has come from our early environment and upbringing; all the harm that other people have done to us knowingly or unknowingly at an age when we could not defend ourselves; and the methods we acquired (many of them now unconscious) to ward off the pain of unbearable situations. (This is very similar to Janov's ideas although he would not have used the term original sin) and this

constellation of pre-rational reactions is the foundation of the false self. The false self develops in opposition to the true Self. Its center of gravity is itself.

I would say the false self is who we think we are. It is the response we make to being bombarded repeatedly with the idea that we are not acceptable as we are, that we must become what other people expect us to be, and that we must do that happily and agreeably. The personality, the false self, is built on the foundation of self rejection. We learn to ignore our own needs when they are never met and then convince ourselves that they really never existed.

This replacement person is kept in place by fear, fear of the pain that hides behind it and fear of the isolation we would experience if we did not participate in the culture of the false self. And, since love and fear cannot occupy the same space, this is the part of ourselves that has to die in order for us to become whole again and grow into totally loving beings, which is what this religion stuff is all about. Of course, this makes a strong connection to all the teachings of Jesus that refer, in some way, to dying, and also to being reborn or becoming as a little child again. The process of losing who we think we are, and the fact that this is inevitably associated with experiencing pain (again, "Take up the cross and follow me" relates strongly here) makes it frightening to say the least, and would imply that this process is going to take a long time.

By the time I had saved enough money to enter Primal Therapy I had survived 18 horrible months in the Peace Corps in Guatemala, had conquered panic attacks, and a year later the hives problem. I had spent 4 successful years in show business with a variety of experiences that had helped me advance on the path of self understanding. I thought I had done pretty well and was hoping there wouldn't be too much more to go.

The second day of therapy I went back to my room at the hotel. There was a song in my brain that would not go away, and it was a huge irritation. I decided to relax and clear my mind to see if I could get it to stop. I sat in a chair and began my little experiment. I closed my eyes, tried to think of nothing, and slowed my breathing. Then I exhaled very fully, and suddenly there was a sensation as if some sort of energy was rising up from my abdomen. It seemed to get stuck at the diaphragm and created such a horrible feeling that I thought it was going to tear me apart or that my heart would stop beating. I gasped a quick breath to drive away the sensation and sat there stunned.

I had no idea what had happened. It seemed that I had discovered some sort of barrier in myself or a way to unlock more old pain than my system could manage. Anyway, I learned without doubt that to even approach that barrier was to be hurled back

from it with tremendous force. The next day I asked my therapist what she thought I might have discovered. But all she said was, "Sometimes it is better not to force things." That was no answer at all, and was totally unsatisfying, but there was nothing I could see to do about it. I let it go, but it stayed in the back of my mind. One idea I had was that releasing old pain might make that barrier approachable some day, and the best thing I could do was to simply continue with the primal therapy.

Of course, I couldn't just forget about the experience and would go back to the barrier 2 or 3 times a year to see how things were going. Nothing changed for about the next 12 years. But, finally I noticed a difference. I began to be able to tolerate that state for something more than an instant.

As I continued to experiment the time lengthened. I began to notice that the "energy" sensation would now continue to rise, would travel up to my head, and I would feel my sinuses open. This was also a time when I began to have experiences that people would refer to as mystical, the most powerful of which was a visual experience in which there was nothing but light. I had been absorbed into that light, and there was nothing left of me but my consciousness of that light. I don't know if these things are related or not. They simply happened around the same time.

The end result of all this is that I no longer look for God outside of myself. As the barriers within me crumble it becomes easier and easier to understand, to perceive, that this world is not so much a creation of God's but is an extension of God. If Jesus' words "follow me" mean that we are to walk the same path that he walked then we are all meant to say the words, to know the meaning of the words, and to know the truth of the words "I and the father are one." But, to one who can perceive reality as it truly exists this would be too obvious since there is really nothing but God anyway. As the Vedantists would say, "There are not two, there is only one."

So, from my perspective, even though the climb has so far been very long and difficult, the view gets more and more glorious the farther I go. Our capacity to experience peace, joy, love, harmony, fellowship is almost (or may be totally) unlimited. The barriers, the limitations we find to this kind of experience are within us. We can break them down, we can eliminate them. And we can expect life to bring us everything we need to achieve that. It may be a shame that the painful aspect, the dying part of all this, is so predominant at first.

I'll end with a quote from Keating:

“The growing awareness of our true Self, along with the deep sense of spiritual peace and joy which flow from this experience, balances the psychic pain of the disintegrating and dying of the false self. As the motivating power of the false self diminishes, our true Self builds the new self with the motivating force of divine love.”

Amen