

“Comprehending”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, pastor of Church of the Covenant 9/1/19

Hebrews 13:1-8; Luke 14:1,7-14

In his book “The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success,” Deepak Chopra says, “The Ego, however, is not who you really are. The ego is your self-image; it is your social mask; it is the role you are playing. Your social mask thrives on approval. It wants control, and it is sustained by power, because it lives in fear.” We all want to stand out, to be revered, loved, praised. We all desire, deep within, to be acknowledged as someone great, noble, worthy. We often feign humility when others compliment us, but deep down we are grateful to be noticed. This is our nature. It is not bad. I like what Rabbi Nimon says about the original sin. He says, “I don’t believe in it. Adam and Eve simply became human when they ate the fruit.” He says, “God forbidding the fruit was tantamount to Him saying ‘whatever you do don’t think of a pink elephant.’” And John’s follow up question is simply this, “You just thought of a pink elephant, didn’t you?” I understand his thinking. We are not ultimately defined by our ego or our behavior. We are defined by something much deeper in our core, and must come to grips with the fact that each of us is multidimensional, multifaceted, or better yet multi-faced.

The author Marty Rubin said, “Every face is born with a thousand masks to go with it.” This concept alludes to us all masquerading through life, wearing the outer appearance of something that perhaps does not reflect what is going on deep within us. We are all guilty of it. It is part of our learned, if not innate, behavior. We must keep up appearances for appearances’ sake, or even for our own sake—as a sort of defense mechanism. Elizabeth O’Connor, a dear friend of this community for many years, wrote in her book “Our Many Selves: A Handbook for Self-Discovery” that “If I respect the plurality in myself, and no longer see my jealous self as the whole of me, then I have gained the distance I need to observe it, listen to it, and let it acquaint me with a piece of my own lost history. In this way I come into possession of more of myself and extend my own inner kingdom. Suppose we come to know that every recognition of anger and jealousy and greed and sloth is an opportunity to lift out of the waters of unconsciousness a tiny piece of submerged land. Ten, would we not pity the man who is so identified with the good that he denies any intimations from below that this good may not be the whole of him? Such a man is lost... he does not understand what it means to be on the journey of becoming whole.” So, the first step is to recognize that we are not a singular emotion or a singular facet. We have multiple dimensions, both the pretty and the ugly. Know all your sides—even the ugly one, or as O’Connor calls it –“the shaded side” or even as Thomas Keating calls it –“your false self.” This shade of you does not define you! You are much more than your occasionally darker behavior, but yet you must not ignore the other facets of your nature; they are all important to understand.

Earlier this week I saw part of an interview with Anderson Cooper and Howard Stern. It was amazing how they both seemed to almost step out of the formality of interviewer and interviewee and opened up to each other about how the events from each of their own childhoods influenced their later actions as adults. For example, Howard Stern got into radio because his father worked as a radio engineer and idolized radio broadcasters with extraordinary reverence—and as a way to achieve such stature in his father’s eyes, Howard became a radio broadcaster. This is a great example of how many of us are still acting out of ideas and ideologies formed as children. We react to the world through a lens formulated at an early age. The totality of these emotions, these incidents over the course of our life that greatly shape our thinking, often remain submerged, as O’Connor so eloquently stated it—and only rear its head when triggered. Part of our group therapy in this community comes in the form of contemplative prayer. Our teacher of contemplative principles, Thomas Keating in his book “Reawakenings,” said that, “...the divine therapy, through the deep rest accessed in times of contemplative prayer, loosens up the hardpan around the emotional weeds of a lifetime, and the

unconscious begins to unload. As a result, we have a bombardment of thoughts with an emotional charge to them and sometimes raw emotions like anger or fear. To repress such thoughts is like pushing vomit back into our stomach when it is on the way up. If we let it go, we will feel much better. That is why the method of centering prayer tells us not to resist thoughts. Thoughts and rest are two sides of the same process” (p. 29). This idea of “letting go” is not as easy as it sounds. This I know from personal experience, often encapsulated in one piece of advice given to me by my many consolers over the years, “hey, don’t beat yourself up about it.” I remember in one of my early sermons at Ruth’s and my church in El Paso, TX over twenty years ago. I gave the sermon titled “Letting Go.” Before I gave it though, Ruth and I played out a little skit on the stage. I played the part as the psychologist and Ruth the patient. She wore a blanket tightly around her body. It symbolized fear. I began to have her recount her childhood until she stumbled upon a particularly important aspect of her growing up. This was all fiction of course, but the childhood trauma had an obvious connection with her coping with things in adulthood, couched snugly within a very real, crippling emotion of fear. I astutely pointed out that her “fear blanket” (which I creatively called it at the time) was being held in place by her hands only. She feigned disbelief. I told her, “No, it’s true. You alone hold fear into its place surrounding you, choking the life out of you.” “How can that be doctor?” she asked. “I said, you alone control whether fear controls you.” She asked, “What do I do?” I simply replied, “Let it go.” “Let it go?” “Yes, let it go.” In kind of a funny way we bantered back and forth. Then I said, “remove your first finger. Good, now your second, good. Now your third...” on and on until all ten fingers had stretched themselves out and the blanket simply slid off. How wonderful it would be, wouldn’t it, if we could all simply let go of the things that drag us into those dark aspects of our character, dark places in our past? But we can. Don’t be fooled into thinking we can’t.

There is much to say about community as one of the greatest helps we can ever have to help us move along in our journey for personal growth. God works through others and God’s love manifests itself naturally within relationships one with another. You would be hard pressed to find another community that takes it more seriously, for it is with the very name of this faith community, Church of the Covenant, that we find the grand descriptor of tightly formed bonds of love and faithfulness to each other—“covenanting one with another.” There is nothing more solidified than a “pact” between brothers and sisters, and this covenant has carried weight for the past 65 years here in our church. We value a collective wholeness, while respecting its individual parts. There is a common value of group-learning from one another. Thanks to nuggets laid out by the great Buddhist teacher Tich Nhat Hanh in his book “Reconciliation: Healing the inner child” I began to examine how in Spanish there are three words closely linked together: *Prender*-to switch on. *Aprender*-to learn. And *Comprender*-to understand. These are the modern nomenclature used, meanings that have evolved over time, but their actual etymologies, or first meanings are mind boggling. The first, *Prender* comes from the simple word of “to turn over or turn in or even turn on” something. *Aprender* is connected nicely with our English word “apprehend” which meant to grasp, or grab. And finally, though, and perhaps most profound, is the word “*comprender*” or “comprehend”. This means we learn or grasp it in a “co” environment, that is, together. We say *comprehend*, really we are saying we learn it together, in community with one another. This is the greatest enlightenment of all. What good is wisdom or truths if you can’t share with others. It is the unselfish nature of being human; we want to have co-experiences, co-learning. We want to help each other grow.

Tich Nhat Hanh continues in this book to retell an old story about the salt grain. He says of the personification of salt, “I am a grain of salt. I’m very salty. I wonder if the water in the ocean is as salty as me.’ A teacher came along and said, ‘Dear grain of salt, the only way for you to really know the salinity of the ocean water is to jump into it.’ The grain of salt jumped into the sea and became one with the seawater, and its understanding was perfect.” Or as I liked to say, it’s “comprehension” was perfect, its co-mutual-grasp of things was fluid and one with those within this community in the sea. This reminds me of Jesus in John 15 talking of how he abides in the Father and we abide in

Christ, and so we are one together. But what I know from the story in Luke is that we are not to think ourselves, never ever, is that we are above another. We are co-munity. Co-equals. Co-sojourners on the journey of a lifetime together. Let us love one another, encourage one another, and treat each other with respect always, inside and outside this community let us show the world we are here to show peace and love, overlooking our mistakes, and making each other better by listening and being heard. And let us welcome people into our community with open arms, literally and figuratively. Let us reach out to one another daily. Let us demonstrate what radical hospitality looks like. Because people are hurting. People are lonely. People are in desperate need of what we have with one another. People want to be one with the seawater, one with one another, co-learning together.

Shalom