

Freak

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All great spirituality teaches about letting go of what you don't need and who you are not. Then, when you can get little enough and naked enough and poor enough, you'll find that the little place where you really are is ironically more than enough and is all that you need. At that place, you will have nothing to prove to anybody and nothing to protect.

—Richard Rohr

Blessed are the weird people—poets, misfits, writers, mystics, painters, troubadours—for they teach us to see the world through different eyes.

—Jacob Nordby

Invitation to Worship: (from 2 Corinthians 12)

And God said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.”

Therefore, I would rather boast about my weaknesses.

So I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties;

For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Ancient Witness: Matthew 25:35-36, 40

Today I'm talking about my primary teacher, Jesus, again as I so often do. And today I want to talk about another seldom mentioned aspect of who he was.

Jesus was an outsider. And Jesus thought of himself as an outsider, too. In the extra-canonical Gospel of Thomas (31:1-2) there is a close parallel to a passage from Luke:

Jesus said, “No prophet is welcome on his home turf. Doctors don't cure those who know them.”

Jesus, the healer and prophet, felt the wound of being snubbed by his hometown friends, parents and siblings. He lived as a possession-less and homeless traveler, a stranger and sojourner, immigrant. He was accused of associating with the “wrong” kind of people: the sick, the “unclean,” those with physical deformities, prostitutes, drunks, and sinners—the “dregs” of society. He also identified with the “least of these” in a parable:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to see me...as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me. (Mt. 25:35-36, 40)

A more modern word for the kind of people with whom Jesus associated and identified is “freak.” The word originated as: “one who is markedly abnormal, unusual; a person or animal with a physical oddity, who appears in a circus sideshow.” It’s not a kind word.

What are some other aspects to being a freak? The meaning of the word has broadened to include someone who is shunned, laughed at, ostracized, outcast. The word is used today to indicate a broad class of people who don’t fit, next to whom nobody wants to sit, who are out of place. And that’s what we’re talking about, people who are considered to be human filth to be avoided, those who don’t fit in and contaminate the others.

Also notice that there is a connection between being a prophet and a healer. He emanated a kind of healing and wholeness on a personal and social level. And this healing power begins deep within himself, from his own experience of being broken and healed himself. For Jesus, being “out of place” made him a better healer, a better prophet. Jesus was rejected by his family, friends and community. He wasn’t the popular one with those that mattered; he wasn’t the captain of the football team. But he wasn’t there to be liked.

There was something about Jesus and being wounded. The earlier Hebrew prophet talked about a messiah, one who was to come, as being “wounded because of the transgressions of the world.” He was “despised and rejected,” someone “by whose stripes” the world is made whole. Suffering and rejection was a pathway toward his wholeness and the wholeness of others.

Today I want to focus on this. We become aware of our contact with God through our woundedness, through the “freak” aspect of who we are.

There is a whole school of thought called Liberation Theology that says the gospel emerged from the underside of society. Do you want to hear what God is saying? Then listen to the poor, the dispossessed, the exploited, the suffering, those who are wounded. Listen to the voices that are ordinarily ignored. Listen to the powerless. It is there that you can hear the voice of God.

There is a certain sensitivity, a particular way of seeing, that enables those who are wounded to understand the gospel that those of us who are “oh, so respectable” cannot. There is a perspective that they are able to have. So some say, “you want to hear the gospel? Go to these people and listen to them. They can help you.”

Now, being on the underside of society doesn’t guarantee this wisdom and special grasp of the truth, but it is a special place, a privileged place. In one of his sermons, Jesus said,

Blessed are you who are poor...

Blessed are you who are hungry...

Blessed are you who weep...

Blessed are you when people hate you and exclude you, revile and defame you.

(Luke 6:20-22)

Perhaps this honored place, this elevated status, this ability to see and understand has something to do with humility. The voice and presence of God enters because there is an openness. The ego and the defenses are broken down. The pretense of self-reliance is no longer there. The distractions of success and perfection are gone. So the truth, the grace and divine presence is able to enter *through the wound*. Those who enter the kingdom of God, who have experienced

the healing awareness of the Sacred are the wounded. Robert Funk in his book, *A Credible Jesus*, writes,

The invisible domain of God is populated with the poor, the destitute, with women and unwanted children, with lepers, and toll collectors, all considered under some circumstances to be the dregs of society. They are outsiders and outcasts.

Paul knew this, and so he embraced his inner freak and identified, like Jesus, with the outsider and outcast.

If I must boast, I will boast in the things that show my weakness...I am content, then, with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities... (2 Cor. 12:9-10)

Often to enter the kingdom or domain of God is to become aware or to see the presence of God. And for this to happen there must be humility. One must become in touch with one's wounds, one's essential need for wholeness and transformation.

Those who are outcasts and outsiders are often more sensitive to this reality. And they are probably more sensitive to the needs of others, too. It is no wonder that people who enter the helping and healing professions are often those who experience pain and suffering earlier in their lives. In the case of Jesus and many others, we see that *the wound is the way*. The way to God, the way to awareness, is by attending the wounds of others and by experiencing one's own woundedness and need. We earthen vessels let the light in by claiming and embracing our cracks! This however, is not the way of the world. Funk writes:

In a well-ordered society, people know their places. In Jesus' world the few very rich and the many very poor knew their places... Social stratification was enforced by the purity codes, which segregated lepers, women, children, petty tax officials, demoniacs, the physically handicapped, and gentiles.

And to understand Jesus, we must understand the world in which he lived. His very way of being defied and challenged the way of his world. It was a social and religious world that saw the freak as impure and the wounded as cursed by God. Deviance from the norm was a contamination, and suffering and misfortune was a sign of God's disfavor. There is an account when people come to Jesus and say, "Who sinned that his man was born blind?" This was the typical assumption, an assumption challenged by the very being of Jesus.

Those things that deviate from the norm were feared, avoided and condemned by the religious—including forms of sexuality they didn't understand. But Jesus saw those differences not as sinful, not as a result of God's disfavor. Jesus saw every human being as a child of God. And the deviations, the variety, can help us discover what it means to be truly human.

Many years ago when I heard Richard Rohr speak, he shared this wonderful poem that is appropriate here. It's called "The Two-Headed Calf," by Laura Gilpin.

*Tomorrow when the farm boys find this
freak of nature they will wrap his body
in newspaper and carry him to the museum.
But tonight he is alive and in the north*

*field with his mother. It is a perfect
summer evening: the moon rising over
the orchard, the wind in the grass. And
as he stares into the sky, there are
twice as many stars as usual.*

What is considered a freak, what is defective, weak, mortally wounded, is able to see “twice as many stars as usual.”

I believe that there is a freak aspect to us all. Most of us, it’s not so obvious, but it’s there. Most of us, we’re able to pretend it’s not there, but it is. But it’s not something to run away from. It can help us drop our defenses and stop living out of our ego, out of a false self that we project to others and ourselves. As people on a spiritual journey ***we let our freak flag fly!*** Because embracing our inner freak and our woundedness is a pathway to sensing the presence of God, to experience true wholeness and peace, to gaining a heart of wisdom and compassion, to seeing “twice as many stars as usual.”

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)