

“Seeing Christ in Messy Emotions and Poetry at N Street Village” by Cynthia Dahlin

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Palm/Passion Sunday

In our Palm Sunday and Passion readings, we see Jesus truly represented as a human:

lots of swinging emotions,

fear of his own death,

sadness that he will die and lose his earthly identity,

anger at the betrayal he knows will come, but from his own disciples.

The Jews knew a God who walked with their people, a big step forward from a worshipped idol who required sacrifice. But Passion week scenes show Jesus as wholly human, emotional and involved with his disciples and people who came to be with him – like the woman who anointed his feet – and we, like the disciples, have one last chance to learn from him and be true before he dies. The disciples fail, from Judas Iscariot, who betrays Jesus for money, even though he may have also simply thought this was his fate and carried through the act, to the inner circle of Peter and the sons of Zebedee, James and John, who cannot stay awake to be with Jesus, even though he is grieved and agitated. They have not acted as good friends or loved ones, but Jesus does not hold back from yelling at them. The disciples screw up, Jesus reacts in very human ways, but when the story continues after Easter, Jesus continues to walk

with the disciples, and promises to walk with us in an ongoing relationship not harmed by the poor behavior of either. Jesus says he has come to save sinners, even sins a bit himself, toppling tables in the temple in anger, with the occasional distant sarcasm or cruelty in his ways of trying to teach the disciples about his fate to come on the cross. But both are forgiven in the end.

Matthew's detailed description of Jesus' emotions and the strife with the disciples over the week before his death are critical to my understanding that after Easter, the new covenant is with a God who expects us to be human, expects us to make mistakes, and will be with us to give us the inner love and compassion that will ultimately allow us to go through pain in relationships with God, others or even ourselves— and find forgiveness. We humans are complex emotionally, and transfer or transmit our pain all around us. We have to count on God's love, through prayer or through the relationships given us by God, to heal ourselves enough to forgive others for our pain, and be able to live on in love and feel joy rather than to stew in pain and suffering.

As I went through seminary, and tried to work out my theology after reading the writings of more famous thinkers, I called the experience of relief, love and compassion that comes after working through conflict and confrontation to get to an understanding of the other, the Christ part of the trinity. The creator part was nature and beauty in the world, there for me to experience, but not to have to work at except to preserve. The Holy Spirit part was a group ethos to be felt in a moment, or the evidence that more has happened than should have been expected because a work was worthy of God's help and got it. But the Christ moments, to me, are most valuable, because they are solely human, due to interactions of complicated, imperfect people, and so are most powerful.

Poetry at N Street Village

Where I find a lot of my moments of Christ, the realization and change that comes after self expression or personal interaction, is at N Street Village. As most of you know, I have worked there for 13 years as a volunteer chaplain, leading classes on Autobiography and Poetry, providing the women with a safe place to express themselves in deep way. For some of them, it is a re-finding of themselves, after hiding while on the streets so they wouldn't be noticed and abused. For others, it is the first time they have had the chance to think of deeper aspects of themselves and try out words to express how they feel. Sometimes, experiences of pain and sadness cause us all to cry, and sometimes, we are awed together by the beauty of a woman's words and ideas. I want to tell you about a few women, and share their words, and think a bit about their theologies.

First, I will read two poems by Lynda.

Breakthrough Lynda

I've overcome the barrier
climbed over the wall that I've
built around me for so long.
I'm opening up to others,
revealing pieces of myself I had thought
that I'd never shared with another.
I'm experiencing feelings—
no matter what they are,
I process and rock through them;
I accept my past for what it is
and my hope is for a brighter future.
I've learned to live in the present
and this for me
is a breakthrough.

New Life – Twice Lynda

I want to grow up and be someone great.
It'll be great fun and I simply can't wait.
Wanting to be in love, needing to be needed.
All these feelings are rolling around inside, and I don't know
what to do with them.
An unhealthy relationship I thought was grand,
I thought he loved me, I made such big plans.
But now I'm different, no longer truly me,
what will I do with a brand new baby—
I can barely take care of me.
I feel like a baby bringing one into the world,
But I'm happy he's coming, and I'll have someone to love

who'll undoubtedly love me in return.

So many things are changing, I'm no longer me.

Where are my times of fun and running about simply being free?
No longer is there just me to consider, I've a new life to care for.

A newborn baby is coming and I'll become a new mother.

Lynda is now in a home for new mothers, and is being coached on parenting skills, after working on addiction issues and some life skills planning while she was pregnant. She is in her thirties, but had little experience of parenting from her own mother, who she said had been an addict. But listen to the hope and optimism she has. When we wrote about God, she had deep faith. I might be terribly afraid in her shoes, homeless, jobless, pregnant, but in class, she is invariably cheerful and optimistic, believing God will take care of her, and working to take the opportunities she now has.

Next, Telateau tells a dark story of her life, and again, finds something to rejoice in—that she met her birth mother, and that she has the support of N Street. She only stayed a few weeks, and I do not know if she will return after a while, or I will never see her again. She said this was the first time she had ever written about herself.

Where Are the Seven Dwarfs?

Telateau

My life was like Cinderella,

You know the one with the evil step mother.

You know the one that cooks, cleans, and has no fun.

This is how my story was begun.

At the age of 14, I was put out into this lonely cold world,

Look at this scared and lonely little girl.

She turned to men for signs of affection,

No affection came but from laying on her back.

The institutions raised her from then on,
that she became so numb.

There's a little bit of light in this story I tell.

I finally got to meet my real mother and real family,
and that part of my life is well.

Patricia is mentally ill, and sometimes cannot stop talking to herself, or on other days, wants to argue and be obstructive, so that sometimes I have to put her out of my class. One day, I passed paper around, but no one specifically handed sheets to her, and she reveled in loudly saying "I have nothing to read, because you did not hand me paper." But, when one day I asked the group to write about what they were thankful for,

here is what she wrote.

**Thankful
Patricia**

I am most grateful to the Almighty God who created everything.
I am thankful for what God has done for me.
I give Jesus the praise for his blessing upon me.
I praise Jesus for keeping me each day he has blessed me with.
I thank Jesus for a roof over my head.
I thank Jesus for the clothes he has provided for me.
I thank Jesus for my salvation he has given me so freely.
I thank Jesus for the health he has given to me.
I thank Jesus for fighting my battles for me.
I thank Jesus for praying for me.
I thank Jesus who gave his life for my sin.
I thank Jesus for protecting me from seen danger and unseen danger.
I thank God for being my Lord in my life.

Her view of God is a bit more hierarchical than mine, but she really counts on God to protect her daily, and gives thanks for all I take for granted. When she wrote this, the whole class said "Amen."

Determination

While many women at N Street Village might seem unlikely role models for others in life skills or choices, I was taught by my mentors while at WomenSpace in Sydney, Australia not to underestimate the skills that women on the street have and call on in difficult circumstances. I want to read two poems about determination. The first is by Rachel, who does not attend my classes regularly, and really struggles to express herself verbally or in writing.

**Determined
Rachel**

It ain't over until God says it's over, as one of my gospel CDs says,
and my soul does agree, as I go on from day to day.
Day to day this thought in mind trickles down my heart to my soul,
which helps me move through life when He opens my eyes each day.
When I was younger, not as many body challenges as I have now,
yet it ain't over until God says it's over.
Until I have my family back with me, it ain't over until God says it's over.
A new husband in love with God, children who obey and the new change
God has placed on my life will be my new song in life.
So I do new things such as never before until that change comes,

working daily to achieve this goal in life,
keeping God first as you must for it is he who gives me life.
It is he who gives me the ability to move on.
It is he who shines through my soul and guides me as I keep
believing, trusting, hoping, caring,
day by day in God's way as much as I can.
God will someday give me back my family.
This is my hope, that I will one day as I continue to build on
eternal
things, have a different attitude,
and that I will someday have exactly what my heart prays for,
and more.
Because it ain't over 'til God says it's over.

The second is by Janet, who has attended my classes for all 13
years, and sometimes acts as my helper, getting the paper,
notebooks, pencils and sign-in sheets organized if I come in
with little time to spare.

Determination Is

Janet

A time to decide to do something I've never done before
Boldness to act when you're not 100% sure if you can do it
Chutzpah -another name for courage
Daring to look at another way to solve a problem
Energy to do whatever you are doing
Frankness- the ability to put your thoughts and feelings out
to a group of people
Gregariousness - being outspoken when you are not that way
Honesty - telling others you may or not be able to work with
them
Inventing new ways to help solve problems
Joy in doing something new
Kindness in helping others
Looking at people as individuals
Moving forward when others say "stop"
Never letting pessimism become you
Optimism in life
Piecing together your life
Quiet time
Restlessness
Stalwartness
Time by yourself
Understanding who I am
Values that are positive
Willingness to listen
eXploration
Youthfulness
Zaniness
Seeing a Miracle

How do I tell if I am doing any good by working at N Street? I
know I see a lot of healing moments, see a lot of tears, and
women reaching out to each other to let them know that they

have been heard, and their imperfect selves accepted. But once in a while, I know I have seen a miracle.

I want to tell you about my experience with Mary M. I do not have her earliest poems, because after she read each one, she tore them up into tiny pieces and threw them away. She would not tell me her name, and I could not see her face. She came into class with a cowl neck covering her mouth, a scarf or large hat covering her hair and ears, and huge sunglasses. The first time she read, she also faced away from me, so I could not hear her. The second time she came, I stopped her when she started reading, and asked her to just uncover her mouth so we could hear her words. That day, her poem was "Overwhelmed by Nature", and the class loved it.

Overwhelmed by Nature

Mary M.

The sun in this part of the world,
is so much more powerful and dramatic
Lighting and shining through every molecule and crevice,
giving everything a neon-like glow and effervescence.
The sky almost always is a neon sky blue.
And I remember just as if I were sitting there right now,
one of many remarkable sunsets I experienced.
As I sit here now, I can see the neon sherbert sun
melting into that now royal blue neon sky,
the part where the sun meets the sky, looking like a round
stream
of the finest richest melting butter.
Sitting right in front of that sun,
like it was on a movie screen before me,
I felt a warmth radiating from it like I never felt before.
A gentle yet penetrating heat
that warms you slowly from the inside out.

Several women complimented her on her use of words, and creating a picture in their heads they would not forget. Mary began coming regularly, and after a while, gave me that poem, but with Anonymous as the author. When she read Thanksgiving, it was the first time she was willing to be somewhat critical of our country—stating that some know a different America than the natural bounty we often give thanks for.

Thanksgiving

Mary M.

**I'm thankful for all the ones who came before us
for the roads and mines they forged,
the buildings and institutions, and most importantly
our rights and freedom that they fought for.**

**I'm thankful to God because he smiled on this country with all
its
natural bounty.**

**But as I enjoy everything this country has to offer, I still
keep in
mind the ones who were stripped of their native lands, as
well as some overseas who know a different America.**

After this, Mary agreed to have her first name and last initial on her poems. By the time we were working as a class to edit the poems for this year's Poetry and Stories book, Mary stepped forward and showed some leadership. She argued with women who wanted to rewrite words in the poems of others to express their own feelings, rather than correct or edit errors and typos. She praised the variety and joy in many works. Suddenly, she took off her glasses. I was stunned. After a year and a half of not seeing her eyes, I had imagined that she had huge, dark eyes with long black lashes behind her sunglasses. She had just normal eyes, but they were smiling, and she had decided to uncover herself completely to us. Since then, she takes off her sunglasses in class, and seems to be ready to reveal herself completely. The change is a miracle to me.

As most of you know, I treat the women in my class as equals in relationship. I do not expect them to write if I will not, and have my own joys and failures in expressing the great losses, silly annoyances and loves in my own life. Sometimes, they are very disappointed when they come in and find out I am not a professional poet, but will just give writing on a topic

a try along with them. But I open each class with a ritual of lighting a candle and giving thanks that they have come to share their lives, their experiences, their emotions and their deepest selves, and say that the burning candle represents the fact that they will be feeding their soul by looking deeply into themselves, and that by sharing from their deeper selves, they can't help but find community, as God is in the attraction we feel, the compassion that is there when we share from their deeper selves. That sharing contains the weaknesses and pains we have trouble expressing somehow, but that we need to confess to be free of it. And sharing those weaknesses and negative emotions is what Jesus did in his last days—and I think that in sharing his anger and disappointment with his disciples and then forgiving them later freed him and them to move on and build many communities that ultimately led here to Seekers.

(An extra poem just for its beauty)

I Painted a Sky
Rachel

I painted a sky so very blue
That I decided to mix the color
Because it seemed almost untrue
Maybe some grey, green, white or yellow
Will help tone down and effectively mellow
This unrealistic hue
Striking me as an entirely unbelievable blue.
But lo! Behold! Yesterday's August afternoon
As I strolled along leisurely humming a little tune
When my eyes trailed along from the street
To the pounding of pavement by rush hour feet
To office buildings emptying out for the day
My gaze travelling from lobbies up and away
Until finally popping over and out from the roof into view
The same color I'd painted
That unrealistic hue.
In the name of realism
I won't again deny
Nature her due.