Fifth Sunday of Easter All Saints’ Church

April 24, 2016 Year C

Acts 11:1-18 Revelation to John 21:1-6

Psalm 148 John 13:31-35

Often when we think of glory or the glorified, we think of perfection, beauty, something beyond this world expressed in excellence, splendor, and magnificence. Usually we are filled with wonder and awe… such grandeur is heavenly, and not of this world.

Yet, Jesus has another idea. Glory for Jesus includes life, indeed, and all of its beauty, but also glory includes betrayal, weakness, sin, confusion, fear and death. The whole kit and caboodle. The Alpha and the Omega.

Judas has just left the dinner party, departing on his mission to betray. And it’s at that point that Jesus says, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified.” Notice…. it’s in the present tense. That makes no sense. How can betrayal be connected to glory? Like Judas, Peter, too, will betray Jesus through his denial. And all of the other disciples will depart and hide and abandon the man they love so dearly.

Glory? Far from it. And yet, Jesus is making a point. It’s all of life that is glory, in all of its messiness, brokenness and upheaval.

“Little Children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me and not find me. Where I am going you cannot come.” He is addressing his disciples tenderly and lovingly because he knows that they are going to be terrified, lost and confused.

And what will save us? “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” It’s that simple, and that difficult.

When my father was diagnosed with cancer, I flew out to Seattle to be with him and my mother. My father, never one to talk, refused to discuss the diagnosis. So frustrating! The night before returning home, I went into his bedroom, almost demanding a conversation. He pretended to be asleep. I turned away to leave, giving up, but just as I reached the door, I turned around, and he was sitting up, looking at me. I stopped, didn’t say a word, and just accepted his gaze. We were caught in this silent embrace for about 5 minutes. In the end, I put my hand on my heart and walked away. By the time I got to my bedroom, I realized that I was never going to see my father alive, again.

Months later, after an urgent call from my mother, while I was flying home, he passed away. I think I was over Minnesota when he died. And yet, I had been given a gift, full of glory, because that silent embrace was full of love, a love my father could never share in words, and yet I had experienced his love, no doubt, in his gaze. I cherish this memory.

No matter the religious tradition, our spiritual sages say over and over again that individuals do not create meaning. Meaning is to be discovered. Since the “meaning of the universe” is universal, it will be discovered by many others as well.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It’s the same thing with your own self. You are not “developing” yourself; you are called to “discover” yourself. There is a huge difference. The first brings on much anxiety and fear… what if you miss something? Make a wrong choice? The second stance is an invitation to explore and discover who God has created you to be.

In other words, it’s as if Jesus is calling you to come and jump into the hidden harmony of life with open arms, with a readiness to receive, to experience, to behold, knowing always that the experience is never of your own making. Our task is to recognize the glory of God in all that we do.

The first time I experienced this type of surrender within a community was when my daughters and I were living in KwaZulu, Natal, South Africa with Gideon, a Presbyterian minister and his wife, Nomsa. Gideon was the minister of Pholela, a church just outside Pietermaritzburg, with 25 “outstations”- rural village churches scattered among the hills of Drakensberg Mountains, which eventually would form the border of Lesotho.

We had just arrived, unpacking, getting settled, when Gideon’s phone rang. Johannes Mbanjwa, an elder of the church and a man in his 90s, told Gideon that it was time for his Last Communion. “Come now.”

Everything changed. Gideon began packing his communion set, Nomsa was boiling water for tea for our thermoses; all our plans for the day were discarded; we were getting into Gideon’s pickup truck to make the two hour drive to be with this man. I think I might have said something like, “can’t this wait.” “Should the children go?

No one paid me any mind.

I want to share an excerpt from my daughter Cahaley’s journal to explain the day:

“After a long drive over uneven dirt roads, into washed up riverbanks, and through cattle fields, we get out of the truck. A scraggly dog howls its dry, dusty cry. There are round houses, smattered with mud and white plaster, covered by a thatched roof. I am afraid to go any further, afraid of what I might see. I am afraid of the death inside that mud hut. But because I am 14, and because I am in a foreign country, I follow my mother. Strange that it is so cold in Africa. I am shivering. There is a dying man in that room; I have never seen live death, only a grave. His ancestors came to him in a dream last night, calling him home. I am afraid that death will steal me away.

I walk inside. The house is lit by the feeble sunlight coming through the small windows, framed by old lace curtains tattered, with brown edges. There stood the old man, surrounded by his wife and lots of women dressed in black and white uniforms, their church dress, Gideon tells us.

The old man uses his carved wooden cane and walks over to the white plastic lawn chair and slowly eases his feeble body into it. His eyes are hidden under thick glasses. He is covered in cloth upon cloth, jackets, and towels to keep him warm. His wife is wearing a pink terrycloth robe. They are old, but I don’t think anyone’s dying today. She gives Gideon 20 rand, about $3.00, it’s all that she has. It hurts him to take it, but he accepts the gift.

A woman calls out with a song and the others join in. Their hands are beating their Bibles to create the backbone of their rhythm. They are dancing, nothing practiced; they are moving and jumping up and down, high into the air and listening to their blood and to their bones. It’s a dance to God.

A baby cries and he is given a chicken bone to chew. New life is gnawing on death, both the baby and the bone exist in each other. And then Gideon places the chalice on the crate, pulls out the round loaf of bread and raises it up. It’s Last Communion. It’s another dance.”

Just a few months ago, I admitted to my daughters that taking them to South Africa had been pretty reckless… poisonous snakes and spiders, bad water, crazy traffic, isolated villages, often miles away from any hospital, they were so young….

They cut me off. “Yeah, it was crazy, but the best thing that ever happened to us. There was so much life.”

In Africa, and many places like it, the delusion that we are in control forms no hold on reality. But we don’t need Africa to experience the glory of our lives. Jesus commands us to love as he loved us. This love is not about a feeling; it’s about jumping into the hidden harmony of the universe and trusting that God is with us. It’s about letting go; it’s about our presence, our time, our dignity, our listening, our seeing, our lending a hand, our honoring of pain, our forgiveness, our walking together no matter what.

Johannes Mbanjwa died a year later. But his Last Communion marked for him his call by his ancestors to come home. His face had turned toward his Lord and he needed his community to love him in his turning. And they did, and they brought us along to experience the glory.

1. Richard Rohr, Jamal Rahman, Thomas Keating, just to name a few. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)