

“The Struggling Times: Facing Illness, Loss, and Grief”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for First UMC, Grand Junction, Sunday, August 9, 2020

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ
website: www.fumcgj.org/sermons-2/

Scripture Texts:

2 Cor. 4:8-10 [NLT]

OPENING

(*Dreams, both of which introduce the subject for today: The blessings in illness, loss, and grief*)

From Lisa Burns:

I have had a couple of God-given dreams; one occurred two or three weeks before my dad died.

I dreamed I was standing in space and an angel behind me was giving me a vision. He told me that people I loved were going to be “going soon.” I wanted to turn around and look at him but he told me not to, just to pay attention to what he was showing me.

He gave me an indication [of what he meant] with the images of my dad’s truck and my mom’s wheelchair, to prepare me [for the fact] that I would be losing my parents. There was more to the dream than that, but the gist of it was that I was being prepared for the losses that would come.

I was so grateful to have had that assurance, that it was all part of...[a] plan: In the next 7 years’ time, I

would lose –

- both Dad and Mom,
- a dear family friend who was like...[another] parent to me,
- my eldest brother, and
- a beloved dog.

...[Even down to] my dog, I felt I had been given [those images in] preparation [for those losses].

What a blessing it was! I’m not sure I could have endured the grief as well as I have,... if I had not been given...[the] gift [of that dream].

And from another:

In June of 1984, my father was very active, and when we went for a visit, we would still play catch in the front yard or even go hunting. We would even work on my grandfather’s car if we needed to. When I was in my late teens and early twenties, I would go watch my dad play softball. He was a short stop, and he was extremely fast. This was the way he lived his life - always busy but thoughtful toward others.

I never really told my dream to many folks.

The dream: I was thirty-four years of age and, like my dad, very active.

All my life, I never seemed to require much sleep, but this night I was extremely tired and went to bed early. Within hours I woke up screaming, “NO, NO!” I had just dreamt I had seen my father as an old man with a cane and all hunched over. It was so real that I woke up drenched in sweat.

He looked at me through the eyes of a very old man. But on the good side, he was still smiling his usual smile which confused me because he was so “old-looking”. (*End of the dream.*) It made me think of the pictures of what artists depicted Moses looking like.

One month(!) later, he came to visit me in Maryland. He came in on a Friday night. My wife wanted to watch [the TV show] *Dallas*, so we went to a sports bar down the street to watch a fight on TV. It was over fast – we were home within 2 hours. The next morning, I had to go to a wedding, and my mother and dad were going to go visit some friends. Just 2 hours later he died of a massive heart attack in my home.

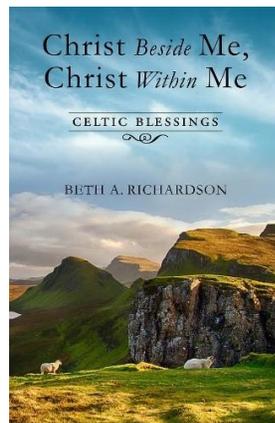
Within hours, my mind went back to the dream. Was it for me to be prepared for his death or an aging father? That is probably the most vivid dream I ever had. Don't discount your dreams.

SERMON THOUGHTS

I. Beth Richardson and *Christ Beside Me, Christ Within Me*

→ The list for this segment:
“The Struggling Times:
Facing Illness, Loss, and
Grief”

- ✓ For One Who Is Hurting
- ✓ Facing Illness
- ✓ Choosing a Path
- ✓ A Holy Pilgrimage



- ✓ You Sit by the Bedside
- ✓ The Shadowlands
- ✓ A Blessing of the Grief
- ✓ *A Blessing of the Empty Space*
- ✓ Some Days Are Very Hard

A Blessing of the Empty Space

You sit in the empty place that is left,
After the death, the arrangements, the service,
The cards and calls and e-mails,
The departure of family,
The thank-yous and acknowledgements.

Left with the emptiness,
The space that can never be filled
In quite the same way.

You see a shadow, hear a sound,
Taste a food they used to love,
Start to tell them something about your day,
Smell a blanket or sweater,
And your eyes and heart fill with tears.

The first week, the first month, the first birthday,
The first holiday, the first anniversary,
These bring you to the place of remembering,
The place of exquisite, lonely sorrow.

Bless you and your memories.

Bless the tender heart that beats within you.

Bless the empty space that can never be filled.

The shadows, the smells, the tastes, the thoughts,
Transform their pain into blessings,
Signs that though you live in that desperately
empty place,

Your loved ones accompany you,
Laugh in the shelter of your heart.

The empty place
That can never be filled
In quite the same way
Is filled...with love.

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TO THE SCRIPTURES for TODAY

Incredible hope from the Scripture text for today.
(*Unpack this a bit – see Scripture reading file.*)

⁸ We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. ⁹ We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed.

¹⁰ Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies. — 2 Cor. 4:8-10 [NLT]

II. The Heart of Celtic Spirituality: Spiritual Practices

[Source: U.S. Catholic. <https://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201905/12-celtic-spiritual-practices-celebrate-god-our-world-31727>]

Refresher from last week (“cumulative force” of the series):

- Learning by heart

For this week: **Thresholds**

Thresholds are the...[in-between spaces that we must negotiate] when we move from one time to another, as in the threshold of dawn-to-day or dusk-to-dark; from one space to another, as in times of pilgrimage or in moving from secular to sacred space; and from one awareness to another, as in times when old structures start to fall away and we begin to envision something new.

The Celtic peoples had a love of edges and boundary places, most likely as the result of living on an island, but they also held a keen sense of the Otherworld as a place just beneath the veil of this one.

Celtic Christian monks were also drawn to edge places, inspired by those who fled to the desert. They found their own threshold places, such as Skellig Michael, a jagged stone island jutting out into the Atlantic on [top of] which the ruins of a monastic community are still perched....



Scripture meditation

*Thus says the Lord:
Stand at the crossroads, and look,
and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way lies; and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls.*
—Jeremiah 6:16

Related to Thresholds: “*Thin Places*”

Marcus Borg’s treatment of this as “*Thin Places*” in his *The Heart of Christianity* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), pp. 155-163

Scripture bases (Verses immediately following Jacob’s dream of his heavenly ladder)

16 Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” 17 And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”
— Genesis 32:16-17

And, the Apostle Paul speaking of God in Acts 17:28a Said, “*In him we live and move and have our being*”.

If that is so, then as Borg says, “there are...[no fewer than] two layers or dimensions of reality”. (*Unpack this statement.*) And the idea of “thin places” represents those places, events, sudden awareness where the boundary between those two layers of reality becomes “very soft, porous, [even] permeable” (Borg, 156).

Borg’s list of “thin places” (Borg, 156-161):

- ✓ Places, i.e., real geographical places/sites
- ✓ Nature (“the earth is filled with God’s glory”)
- ✓ The arts

- ✓ People
- ✓ “Even times of serious illness, suffering, and grief”
- ✓ Worship, especially worship music *and* silence
- ✓ The sacraments, but also any sacramental moment or experience where something physical comes to represent or mediate the sacred, God-presence in the world. In this, the Bible itself can be a “sacrament of the sacred”.
- ✓ Prayers, like The Lord’s Prayer, or one of the Creeds. These aren’t a string of propositions meant for us to engage with our minds, but with our hearts – to let ourselves go in the recitation, especially in community, and allow our hearts to open up to God.

ILLUSTRATION: First time I had read of “thin places” (in Borg’s book!) was in Durango in 2003. Visit to Charlie Butler and his playing “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” for his wife – profound! Used the story at Charlie’s own memorial service the following year.

The result is a “heart open to God”, which is, arguably, what the whole spiritual journey is about.

The premise of today’s worship theme is that this “heart open to God” can even be experienced in, as Beth Richardson calls them, “the struggling times” of our lives. And this brings hope.

CONCLUSION

Thresholds in daily life

Become aware each time you cross a threshold. This might be across a doorway, in moving from one activity to another, or the thresholds of the day, especially at dawn and dusk. Pause at each of these and offer a short prayer of gratitude.

“Thin Places” in daily life

Pay attention to the events in your life this week – the unexpected beauty of a sunrise or sunset, a grace-filled interaction with someone you didn’t see coming, a poem, a photograph, a song, a movie scene, the River, a dream, you name it – and “feel your way” along the contours of what may be a “thin place” for you.

Let us pray...