

Opening the Heart to the World

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Word from Tradition: Romans 12:9-18

(from The Access Bible: An ecumenical learning resource for people of faith)

Good morning. It's nice to see some familiar faces again. For those of you who don't know me, I was on the Eastminster vision team last year and am honored to be back and included in this series.

I chose these verses from Paul's letter to the Romans for two reasons that speak to me of my own spiritual journey. First, was his message to be "patient in suffering" and "to weep with those who weep." Second, the passages to "let love be genuine" "love one another with mutual affection" and "live peaceably with all." I do believe that through our grief and our shared suffering, we become capable of breaking open our hearts to each other...to the world...to LOVE. Collectively, we experienced this in the days following 9/11. The world came to a standstill for a time. We stepped away from our busy lives and came together as a nation. People began to question the meaning of life. It wasn't how much stuff we had, it was about family and friends. Was I loved? What is the purpose for my life? We were kind to one another. That was a world I wanted to live in. Unfortunately, although we did weep for a time together, we weren't encouraged by our leaders to 'be patient in our suffering,' instead we were instructed to get back to 'normal.' As we all know, our world has never been 'normal' again.

You may be wondering how this relates to my own spiritual evolution from organized religion, in this case, Christianity, to the death of God, and a rebirth of a deep ecumenical Spirituality in my life and in my work as an artist. It's not an uncommon story. I underwent a similar personal journey of grief, transformation, and awakening that broke open my heart to the world. The wisdom and compassion that emerged out of my suffering twenty plus years ago continues to guide my life today. As the Greek

playwright Aeschylus wrote: “In our sleep, pain which can not forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, until in our despair, comes wisdom through the awe-ful grace of God.”

Like most of us, I inherited my particular faith from my family of origin. I was raised Protestant in a small New England town. My parents weren't religious people, we didn't speak of faith in our home, but my mother wanted to give her five children, some religious grounding and so we attended Sunday service at our local Congregational church.... Pilgrim Church gave us a sense of belonging, a community and we celebrated the holy days with friends and neighbors. After our minister was asked to leave for being too 'liberal' and tired of struggling to get her teenagers out of bed on Sunday morning, my mother decided that our church-going days were over. As the youngest of the five, I had missed the opportunity to study the Bible and be confirmed in the church but later I joined Campfire Girls, a Christian-based teen organization. I wrote this passage in my bible: “The day when I really started to believe in God is when I went to Pioneer Girls.” It's interesting to me that I had a relationship with God but strangely, not with Christ. As I got older, and with the social movements of the 70s, I moved away from church but continued to believe in a benevolent God that would protect me and my family. I was wrong.

Today is a day of mourning for our nation. It's a day for remembering lives lost too soon and the families left behind to bear the weight of their grief. This has also been a day of mourning for myself and my family for twenty-two years. Today is the anniversary of my beloved brother Richard's death from AIDS. He was my mentor. My inspiration. And my biggest cheerleader. He was 39. I was 29. Richard was the only son, the oldest, and I was the youngest. Separated in age by ten years almost to the day, he played a Svengali-like role in my education and evolution. Richard taught me to be fearless and he continues to inspire me in death. I miss him still.

In 1989, people believed you could get AIDS from toilet seats or from simply being in the proximity of someone who had the disease. There was a lot of fear and the average life expectancy was 18 months from time of diagnosis. AIDS was a death sentence but I

prayed to God to save Richard. I prayed when he was going to get tested.. I prayed he would be one of the lucky ones and make it. I'd always felt our family was somehow blessed and looked over by God but my prayers went unanswered and I watched him slip away before me on this day, 22 years ago. It's an image etched into my memory that can never be erased. For me, this day marks the beginning of my spiritual journey although I didn't know it at the time. It was also when I **began** to divorce myself from God and the Christian tradition. In part due to our religious and political leaders at the time proclaiming that my brother deserved to die this horrific death because of his sexual orientation.

My family and I grieved deeply for Richard, especially my mother. She and Richard, her only son, were very close. It was unbearable at times to witness her suffering and she smoked more heavily in her grief. I tried to care for my mother as Richard had asked of me prior to his death and to find strength knowing Richard would want me to carry on. But I failed at both. Nine-months later, while on vacation in Bora Bora, I wrote a post card to my mother telling her that Richard must be there. The remote tropical island was Paradise. Heaven on Earth I wrote. She never got that card. She died suddenly from a heart attack the night before I returned home. My brother and my mother were now both gone. My heart ached. Alone in my grief, I began a descent into substance abuse, trying numb the pain. My mother had been the center of our family and her death broke us apart. Once believing that as long as I had my family I could survive anything, I now found myself suddenly orphaned. Looking back, I can say that I entered into what the Christian mystic St John of the Cross defined as "a dark night of the soul." Darkness pervaded my world. People around me said that life goes on. Get back to normal, but nothing was normal again. There was little 'patience for my suffering.'" I had few to weep with. And I was angry at God. Why would a loving God allow so much suffering? I felt abandoned by God and so I abandoned him.

That was a very dark period in my life and I believe two things eventually 'saved' me from what would have been my own premature death. My art. Painting my heart on the canvas and finding a compassionate therapist, to bear witness and affirm my experience.

It's why I believe so passionately in the power of art and listening to heal the wounded heart. Over time, like the butterfly emerging from the chrysalis, I began to slowly emerge from the darkness and saw the world with new eyes. I read books on philosophy and theology searching for the meaning of life. I discovered Buddhism and "The Tibetan Book of the Living and Dying" that speaks to suffering and the impermanent nature of existence. I read my brother's journals and found strength in the wisdom of his words and poetry. And I discovered deep compassion for all beings, especially those who were grieving, and a desire to be of service to the greater good. Over the next decade, I did AIDS activism, volunteered with the Names Project, and did education and outreach around women and AIDS. Later, I found my way to the Dougy Center where I worked with grieving children and families. My own family began to heal and we came together as a family once again.

Then, September 11, 2001. It was the twelfth anniversary of Richard's death, I was lighting candles in his memory when I heard of the terrorist attacks. Already in a place of



mourning, I was stunned and bereft. However, it was during the Day of Remembrance on the 14th that I truly had an epiphany. I experienced a sense of LOVE and ONENESS that I had never known before. Much like the love that Paul speaks to in Romans" to "love one another with mutual affection." Christ's message of love. The interfaith ceremony at the Rose Quarter included speakers from all faith traditions—Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist and our indigenous brothers and sisters. As the mystic and poet Rumi wrote: "The broken heart is the doorway to God." It was extremely powerful and on my way home on the MAX I had a vision that became this painting.

One afternoon I was lying on the sofa. I had finished this painting and it was on the floor leaning against the coffee table. As the sun streamed into the room, the heart in the center

appeared to start beating. It probably sounds crazy and I didn't believe it myself. I moved around looking at the painting from different angles. It was just the light, I told myself. An optical illusion? My rational mind couldn't explain what was happening. I came to believe it was an encounter with the mystery. I felt the souls buried within the rubble of the twin towers were somehow communicating with me through the painting. This was my first mystical experience. In *The Mystic Heart*, Brother Wayne Teasdale writes: "In mystical experiences, we are touched by something ultimate, by a mystery that takes us to transcendental realms, perhaps, to the sphere of the divine itself, the 'place' of the totality, the source." This encounter with the mystery also felt like a message to me... a call to commit myself to my art, to healing, and to a deeper spiritual vision.

This was a leap of faith for me. I had been making art since I was a child and did my undergraduate work in fine art but like most struggling artists, I fell into graphic design after college and over the years had a very successful and lucrative career. I was earning a lot of money during the dot.com boom but was stressed out, working 60-70 hours a week and had little time for a life. In what little free time I did have, I was making some art and doing volunteer work with grieving children. In many ways it was a gift that the dot.com bubble burst and my design business came to a screeching halt. I don't know how I would have gotten off that speeding train otherwise! By the time of this mystical experience with the painting, I had the financial resources to follow the artistic and spiritual path I was now being called to. I didn't know where this path was going to lead me, I was simple going to listen to my inner voice and follow the threads where ever they led me. To borrow from Thoreau, I was going to "go confidently in the direction of my dreams. Live the life I had imagined."

This path first led me to environmentalist and Buddhist scholar, Joanna Macy in 2002. A long-term activist, she has worked tirelessly for decades on behalf of the living earth and all her creatures. It was during a ten-day training with her that coincided with the first anniversary of the attacks and the 13th anniversary of my brother's death that I experienced a spiritual homecoming. To quote Macy: "if we won't feel pain, we won't feel much else, either—both loves and losses are less intense, the sky less vivid, pleasures

muted.” For several days, we went deep into our grief and despair...opening our hearts to the pain and suffering of our world. With hearts broken open, we were then sent off alone into the forest for eight hours to find wisdom and support from the natural world. It was on a rock, by a creek that I had what I believe was my second mystical experience. The bee that landed on my pencil while I was drawing. The sound of the water. The smell of the trees. The butterflies dancing in the wind. Everything was vibrantly alive. I was alive and in touch with the sensuous world around me. I was touched by the ultimate, the Holiness of the natural world. I no longer saw God as above me, but woven throughout the fabric of all creation. I felt a sense of oneness that has guided me ever since. It was a profound homecoming and awakening and I returned home committed to serving the healing of our world.

Continuing to follow the threads of this calling, I founded Sacred Art Studio in 2003 and completed graduate studies in our world’s spiritual traditions at Marylhurst. It was during my studies there that I found healing around my relationship to God and Christianity in general. I didn’t return to that particular faith tradition but I came to appreciate Jesus and his message of love and service. I also discovered the wisdom woven throughout all our religious traditions. In 2006, I journeyed to Peru on pilgrimage to learn the ancient ways of our indigenous ancestors through ceremony and ritual. I know in my heart that **we are all One**. I received this inner knowing through the mystical experiences I’ve shared with you and through my studies, both here and abroad, I have come to believe that no matter who we choose to worship—Yahweh, Christ, Allah, Buddha, Krishna, or a tree—we are all interconnected and we are all of the Earth. Everything is holy and the earth is worthy of our reverence and our care. Our lives, our very survival, depends on our being good stewards of this glorious Creation.

My art has evolved over these years and I draw inspiration from the holy wells of all faiths and from our earth-honoring ancestors. My process is one of devotion and I dedicate my work to the healing and awakening of all beings. This is my prayer. I have reclaimed the word *prayer* for myself through the sacred act of creating art. Silence, contemplation, the paintbrush gliding along the canvas, and gratitude for the gift that has

been given to me in this life. All acts of prayer....praise. I'm in the process of creating three large panels that draws from the Garden narrative. The over arching theme is that the "Garden is right here, right now," not in some paradisaal future. The center mandala, what I call the "Creation Illumination" is complete and I am working on the two outside panels. One with Adam. One with Eve. This piece has been a calling from the Divine. To open hearts and to raise awareness of endangered species **and** to raise money for the World Wildlife Fund. Like our grief, I believe that art and beauty can also open our hearts to the Divine, to what is possible. To love. I'd like to share with you **the word from today**. From spiritual artist Alex Grey. From his book, *Art Psalms*.

Theosis.

Art can transform the way we see ourselves and the world.
Sacred art has always depended on this possibility.
Theosis means coming closer to God by contemplation of icons.
New ways of seeing lead to new ways of being.
When your being is transformed,
The world occurring to you transforms.

A great work of art, once seen, is unforgettable.
We encounter an art object and contemplate it.
It remains as a trace in our memory.
Our encounter may have lasted a minute or an hour,
But the artwork is now alive in our minds
Doing it's subtle business.
Art can rewire our brains, suggesting a new reality.

Contemplation of a Buddha or Christ
Implants the possibility of our own enlightenment.
Icons of a United World, a Sacred Planet
Are essential now, to implant
The possibility of saving our collective lives,
Reverencing our Mother Nature Goddesself,
The One WorldSpirit of all plants and creatures.

9/11/1989. 9/11/2001. 9/11/2011. Days of mourning, days of remembering, days of transformation. Let us weep together and be patient in our suffering. May we go forward with our hearts open to one another other. To our world. May we live as Paul wrote, "peaceably with one another." In closing, I'd like share this passage from the

12th century Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi. “My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks, a temple for idols, and a Ka’ba for the pilgrims; it is a tablet of the Torah, and the book of the Koran. I profess the religion of Love, and whatever direction its steed may take, Love is my religion and my faith.”

Thank you and may all beings know peace. May all beings be loved.