

26 August 2017

To Face the Way of Love (John 6: 60, 66-69)
(KH)

I love poetry and one of my favourite lines is from Mary Oliver's poem 'The Summer Day' that simply says: "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention..."

I begin with this tonight because for me the invitation of living in the dynamic of call and response is about particular ways of paying attention, particular ways of seeing. Like most of us, I do not have a dramatic story of loud calls followed by significant responses visible to the incidental passer-by. However I do have a sense of an increasing capacity to pay attention and so recognise the energy and presence of God in the human story. This line helps me see two things. I grew up in the NT, in some remote Aboriginal communities where, surrounded by silent landscapes of great beauty and a culture of listening to the land, I absorbed a way of paying attention to nature that has stayed with me and has often been a source of solace and insight. The line also helps me see that through all the years of my adult life, when assailed with struggles and unknowing, when I had no words for prayers and no tangible sense of being heard anyway, paying attention was my praying, paying attention was my pathway and my redemption. And there is still a truthfulness about this – however I feel, whatever ups and downs I am experiencing, there are ways to pay attention that open me up to the presence of grace, the presence of God's love, and thus offer scope for transformation within.

Looking back, I can see that some part of me has always known that we are each called towards this graced, life-giving Love, called to discover it within us and beyond us, and to know ourselves held by it. Because of this we are called also to love as an action, responsive to shaping our lives with love at our centre. I was inspired in this way of seeing by my grandmother MH. We connected, heart to heart, in a special way. There was an essence to her that was of God and I loved her for that and who that made her to be. She was a beautiful, humble person whose commitment to seeing the good in others was a direct expression of her knowing herself held in God's love. Her groundedness in

God showed me much about what the call to love meant in a daily way, as an expression of our inner life.

When we hear this call towards Love, this invitation to participate in the reality of God, then we respond in some way. Ignoring it is a response, delaying thinking about it is a response, but some part of me has wanted to pay attention. I guess I've always echoed Simon Peter's words in saying "Where else would I go?" Everything else seemed empty of a depth and truth I sought. So, although I did not always know what it would mean or require of me to be truly faithful to God, I have tried to keep facing the way of Love and responding to what this call might mean in the context of my particular life.

As a child, I chose to be confirmed in the church. Although a routine occurrence – the Bishop travelled around the NT doing many such services - it was quite a meaningful decision for me. For various reasons, I was in the shadow of my siblings who were also being confirmed and so I realised that what mattered was what it meant within me, not what others thought. I feel like this was the beginning of a very conscious inner life with God which I said very little about for many years. It was also the beginning of some other things. Helpfully I began a practice of morning quiet times, a lifelong discipline for which I am grateful. Less helpfully, I thought that this commitment meant I had to be extra nice and very good. I didn't do on my sister or argue with my brother. I did chores for my mother without complaint and laughed at my dad's jokes. This worked pretty well for some time - especially for all those around me who benefited! And though a naïve, overly-simplistic outlook, I learnt some important things. I learnt that when one makes a commitment to something, there is a responsibility to follow through, and that this can ask a lot of us. I began to see that true kindness and selflessness had to come from a deeper place than my childish efforts at being nice; that love in hard places had to be an expression from a deeper reality than my identity as a nice person. These truths have stood the test of time and continue to inform my growth. I also learnt ways of paying attention, of noticing others, noticing the world - and the need for our responses to ourselves, each other and our world to come from the depths of our inner life.

As a late teenager I read a book which had a big impact on me. In no uncertain terms it promoted the view that to really follow God was about not compromising our lives in any way but turning from the world to give our all to Jesus. Whilst no longer

comfortable with the dualistic framework, I have never lost the belief that if God's call means anything then it really does mean everything. I suddenly saw that the inner life was not a sideline, God was not just a fair-weather friend. Either our whole being was in God and for God or we were kids dabbling at the edge of the shore. So I sat on the top of a cliff looking out to the vast sea and committed to the journey of no compromise - or what I now call wholeheartedness. I remember this moment so well, perhaps because it was immediately followed by the dilemma of how to return home - during my deep spiritual moment, I had become trapped by a herd of cows that had quietly wandered up behind me on the grassy cliff top - I had to navigate one or the other. Surely I didn't actually have to leap from a great height into the sea to seal this commitment? It was a long way down - so I opted for shuffling along the grass past the cows! Not all that glorious really...

Well, these understandings – true kindness, open attentiveness and sincere wholeheartedness - have shaped my life in the many years since. They have shaped my choices, my offerings and my becoming. They are not the only values I hold dear – I stand here tonight because I am committed to courage, transparency, and truthful storytelling! Perhaps we all have such lists, by which we try to abide. But because of their early roots in me, these became touchstones for me and have guided me in times of uncertainty and struggle.

What I came to understand in my adult life was that God's call was ever deeper and the response needed to be ever more intentional. God's love and the call to live out this love were far more encompassing and life changing than I had anticipated or imagined. And knowing how to pay attention well, or how to pray, was also harder. At a very formative time in my twenties, I began to see a spiritual director. Sister Barbara became deeply significant for me in my expanding sense of faith and my growth in God. Over many years we became close and it is only a couple of years since she died, a loss I still feel acutely. I could write a book of her wise sayings, but even more profound was her seeing of me and her loving kindness. Sister Barbara companioned me through years of trauma and struggle, encouraging me to stay true to my call - to remember the steady presence of God and helping me discern what it meant to keep living a life of love. Her way of seeing me meant she understood that beneath all circumstances and pain, I

wanted to face the way of light and respond to life from deep places. She encouraged and nurtured me, and I am forever deeply thankful.

At the time of my youngest daughter's birth, my husband, whom I loved, abandoned me and our family of three daughters. He had a major breakdown that he never found his way through. Instead he became abusive to me, difficult with the girls, and lived a blaming, angry life in which he was never faithful to himself or any relationship. He died suddenly three years ago. His life and his death have been complex and painful experiences for my girls and I to navigate, but slowly we are healing from the grief and confusion. In these years there have been many other difficulties such as serious health problems and workplace hardships, and the ongoing daily-ness of sole parenting three children, a circumstance I have not found easy. Continuing to live my life well, live faithfully and attentively, through distressing circumstances over so many years, has been the breaking... but perhaps also the making of me.

I will leave further details to your imaginations. I am guessing we have all been in places where an ordinary day has seemed an impossible task. What matters more to say is something about the call and response through these times. What I tried to stay faithful to was that original sense of call towards God as Love and to living out this Love. When emotionally battered about, it was hard to keep knowing myself loved in any really felt sense but I tried to trust this truth, trust the profound perspective of a more eternal sense of life. And in so doing, I sought to give myself wholeheartedly in contexts of goodness.

In times when life felt to be under heavy clouds, it was harder to pay attention well. Yet I learnt to expand my seeing and look for what else was true in that moment, where the presence of God could be found. Like recognising the kindness of another arriving alongside the experience of aloneness. Or seeing the gentleness of violets flowering or the colours of a sunset sky, when the day had felt only bleak. There is much healing and hope, if we can pay attention this way - either then or later. And in complex circumstances it was hard to know what it meant to live Love. Being good and nice certainly wasn't gonna cut it anymore! But there was something to be said for true kindness – for, when spacious, attentive and generous, kindness is the enacting of love, a living grace. So when I found myself in situations for which there was no script,

I would think 'just be kind' and somehow this carried me and kept me open, kept me aware of the presence of grace. I began to realise the profoundness of joyful kindness, unexpected kindness or daily repeated kindness, that ultimately changes me, frees me, and connects me with the boundless love of God. Perhaps you too have experienced this.

So, attentiveness, wholeheartedness and kindness - my responses to God's call of Love. It may sound simple but it isn't always easy. Like all of us, I grapple with being human and spiritual, being broken open and wholly healed. I frequently encounter situations where I need to listen to what love offers and asks. What does love look like, in a situation where I need to be self kind as well as caring for the other and our earth? What does it mean to be held in love, when we are struggling with ourselves and our memories? Where is love in the harsh places of the world or when we ourselves feel distressed? How does kindness transform the way I relate to others in difficult situations? How do I stay awake to knowing myself truly loved and enable this to become a wholehearted offering?

There are many such daily questions and I am learning, as the poet Rilke says, to simply live them, to be patient towards what is unresolved in my heart. I have come to understand that broken hearts love differently and that there is grace in this, gift in this. I've heard that the truth sets us free and that simply asking true questions clears us and grows us. I have learnt that there is deep healing and freedom in forgiveness and thus attending to the work of this matters.

And stillness, nature, companionship, laughter... These are among the deeply graced gifts that offer me new ways to see and heal and hope... ways to stay faithful to the journey and aware that we are loved by a tender, spacious God whose call is steady and embracing. I finish with a line of poetry from the mystic Rumi who said, 'There are many ways to kneel and kiss the ground.' I find that delightful and hope that life's journey enables their continued discovery.