

THE LOVE GOD IS, THE LOVE WE ARE CREATED TO BECOME

Mark 10: 35-45; Philippians 2: 1-11

One of the best books I've read and one I would highly recommend, is entitled: "The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World." If the title alone doesn't grab you, the content will. It is based on conversations between two of the greatest spiritual masters of our time – The Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Even as one is Buddhist and the other is Christian, they have been the most intimate of friends, with a profound respect, verging on reverence, for each other. The editor of the book organized a gathering of these two spiritual giants over several days in Dharmasala, India, where the Dalai Lama lives in Exile. As some of you may know, the Dalai is considered the spiritual leader of Tibet. He is exiled because China considers Tibet its own territory and refuses to recognize Tibet's independence and the Dalai's rule.

Desmond Tutu had been a Christian leader of the Anglican church in South Africa for many decades and had exercised his leadership through the difficult years of Apartheid, through the release of Nelson Mandela and the rebuilding of South Africa past its oppressive racist history. He was also one of the architects of the now famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the country. Our own Truth and Reconciliation Commission here in Canada with indigenous peoples of this land followed the process Tutu spearheaded in South Africa. The evils and violence of racism exist in most parts of the world and only opportunities for truth-telling and the possibility of reconciliation offer a way toward justice that does not become vengeance and retaliation. As people share their stories, as tears are shed, as people come on their knees to repent and seek to make amends where they can, hearts are healed and bridges are built toward a new way of being with one another past the wounds of racial injustice.

OK. But both men have also suffered massive hardship in their lives – The Dalai Lama is in exile and he has witnessed the suffering and death of so many of his people, helpless to stop it. Tutu, while alive, left his church and gave up his ordination because his niece, also an ordained minister, had been rejected by the church because she is queer. Tutu was also suffering from serious cancer which eventually killed him. Racism continues to be a part of his country, and it will take generations of work to overcome it. So much in both their lives has been painful and beyond their ability to control or make right. And yet... both men possessed and possess profound inner joy and generous compassion.

In their recorded conversations, they distinguish between joy and happiness. Happiness depends on external circumstances, and so it can come and go. Many things in their lives have prevented them from being "happy". Joy, however, is something that lives and grows from within. It is joy that must be cultivated so that it lives and grows even when bad things are

happening on the outside and in personal life. Both the Dalai and Tutu are joy-filled human beings. They cry easily but they also laugh easily. They are alive. The compassion in their souls overflows to all who encounter them.

So, what is their secret? In order to get at what they have to teach us about joy and about compassion, I want to dive into our scripture readings. Tutu is a disciple of Jesus and the Dalai has a deep respect and reverence for Jesus. What they teach and what they live embody what Jesus came to reveal and embody. When the bible tells us that God is love, what does that mean? Love is one of those words people bandy about all the time. What makes the love whom we name God as revealed and embodied in Jesus unique? How does such love live through the witness of Tutu and the Dalai?

Our Scripture readings zero in on what it means that God is love and how such love is revealed and embodied in Jesus. In our gospel reading, two of Jesus' disciples ask him for top positions in the new kingdom they hope he will establish. They want power, status, money and fame. It's all about who succeeds and who wins in the race to the top that is life. It's all about building a fortress of security around you and those you love. It's about getting all that you can get for yourself.

But what does the request of James and John stir up among the rest of the disciples? Anger. A me-first attitude only breeds division and conflict. That's our world too. Just think about what the U.S. leader down south has stirred up around the world and within the nation too. Even though many of us think he's a fool, and a dangerous fool at that, how many people around us admire his capacity to win and get away with lying, cheating and sowing division?

Jesus names it straight out: "You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them." Whether it was Caesar in Jesus' day or Trump or Putin today, this is all too familiar. And the sad part is that so many support such tyranny because they are attracted to it. It arises out of fear and anxiety. Fear and anxiety breed an us-against-them mentality of competition, division and conflict. It breeds suspicion and isolation, and in the end, we are less secure than ever even if some of us have all the money and power in the world. It is a sham kind of security and a façade of confidence and many people at the bottom pay a hefty price for the arrogance, selfish ambition and brutality of those racing to the top.

Jesus says this: "But it must not be so among you... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Wow, now that's ice water poured over the dreams of his disciples. They want greatness worldly style. Jesus points to a kind of greatness that's totally different. There is an important

distinction to be made with the words servant and slave. A slave is how people are treated and what they are made. Whether it's the system or a tyrant who does it, a slave is what you're forced to become. It's evil and it's wrong. But a servant is who you choose to become. A servant is what Jesus has come to reveal and embody as the way to true greatness of spirit. We need to reject and condemn slavery. We need to learn how to become servants for this is the path to true inner joy and compassion.

The Dalai Lama describes himself as a simple monk, a servant. Desmond Tutu also describes himself as a servant, a servant of God and of the people, as much a sinner as a saint. Humble service rather than power, wealth and fame is what drives them and empowers them to thrive. Jesus came to reveal and embody the way of servant love. Would his disciples learn it? What obstacles would they have to overcome in themselves to learn genuine servanthood?

This brings us to our second reading from the apostle Paul to the Christians of Philippi. Like the disciples of Jesus, the community of Philippi is experiencing conflict and division, and Paul is attributing this to a competitive I'm-better-and-more-important-than-you way of being. He contrasts this way to the way of Jesus. He recites the words of what scholars believe is an ancient hymn: "Let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself..."

OK. Let's zero in on the language here. Many scholars today take issue with the translation of the word "though". It's as if Jesus, like the God he represents, is great the way some world ruler is great and then chooses to become humbled. No, these scholars argue. A better word than "though" is "because." "**Because** Jesus was God, he emptied himself. God's nature, or better, the love who is God always moves to be with creation rather than stand above it as a worldly ruler would stand over their subjects. The love who is God embodied in Jesus moves to become one with us, and especially one with the most humiliated and downtrodden of us, whether one enslaved or those abandoned and crucified. Why? Because that is what God-love is like. It descends from whatever imaginary perch of privilege and power it may have to come close, to share, to commune with those at the bottom. This is God's nature. This is what true love is like. It always moves downwards and outwards to get close to others, especially others in need and in pain.

And it is such love moving to get close to those at the bottom, that is raised up and exalted as truly great – "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of Abba God." It is the one who is totally emptied of themselves who is then filled up. It is the one who is emptied of their ego, their self-focus, their self-importance and greatness, emptied through love so that space is opened up for others to enter in and find shelter.

Even though Tutu and the Dalai are spiritual giants. When you come into their presence, they create space for you. You are the most important and special person in the room. You are made to feel like the most unique, precious and spectacular creation of God. Because they possess the Spirit that is in Jesus, the love who is God, they do not regard their greatness as something to be exploited, but empty themselves, taking the form of a servant, creating the space that is love to be with others, and so they deserve to be exalted as truly great. A Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin may fill up the room and suck out the air of any room they walk into, and there's no room for anyone else in their world. You are there to be used and abused based on your utility to their purposes or else you are discarded.

Like Tutu and the Dalai, inspired by Jesus and empowered by divine love, we are called to transformation in the way of servant love, learning how to empty ourselves of the falsity of our egos and fears in order to create space for others, and in order to be filled by a divine kind of joy in becoming ever more who we are created to become. May we hear the call today in a whole new way. May we engage the people around us and in our lives as servants. May we experience the exaltation and glory that comes from being emptied of self in order to be filled by God.

Let us pray: Come to us, O God... Find us wherever we are... Empty us of the falsity in us... fill us with the glory of your love... Exalt us with an inner joy no matter the weight of external adversity... Amen.