

From Pain to Paradise

As many of you know, our good friend, the Reverend Bob Nakata has his memorial service this afternoon.

Bob was a lifelong community activist, the long time minister at Kahalu`u Methodist church, a founding clergy member of FACE, as well as a representative and state senator in our legislature.

He actively worked to preserve Waihole-Waikane when the powers-that-be wanted that Windward paradise to become the new second city.

And he ended his public engagement in our community by helping usher through the largest single funding bill for affordable housing in our state's history, nearly half a billion dollars.

That bill, fittingly, was named in his honor.

And yet, with all of his accomplishments for the public good, with all of his selfless service to others, it really was the last few years of his life that became the most meaningful and the most powerful.

A few years before his death, Bob suffered a series of micro strokes, which, while they did not cause significant paralysis, did force him to become completely dependent upon others.

It made communication very difficult, and sometimes impossible.

Those last few years, when he depended completely on the kindness of others to care for his every need, something very profound happened to him, and to those of us who loved him.

I share this with you today, because Bob's entry into the land of nothingness, his entry into the land of complete vulnerability, is exactly what today's readings invite us to grapple with.

In the older testament reading, it is desert and famine and desolation that comes before blooming fields and plenty and joy.

Mary's magnificat lifts up the poor and the oppressed who are longing for liberation.

James urges his readers to practice that most essential attribute: patience in the face of trouble.

And in the gospel lesson, John the Baptist is only days away from his execution.

Sitting in Herod's dank and dark cell, he sends word in his desolation and vulnerability.

"You Jesus, whom I baptized just last week, are you actually the one, or are we still waiting...?"

And Jesus responds by giving sight to the blind, by giving the lame back their legs, and by unplugging the ears of the deaf.

Yet these wonders are all performed in the shadow of the cross that awaits Jesus.

The cross from which he will cry out: "Eli Eli, lamah sabachtani!"

"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

Desolation.

Vulnerability.

Loss.

These are, it seems, the necessary soil in which the seeds, not of happiness, but of joy, must be planted.

Pain precedes paradise.

Who among us has not experienced desolation?

A divorce.

A cancer diagnosis.

A beloved family member struggling with addiction.

Imploding family relationships.

Financial catastrophe.

The list is endless and nearly all of us have been there – or are there right now.

And while no one seeks out such times in life, such times are crucial if we are to become who who are meant to be.

The unwelcome truth is that vulnerability, desolation and loss in fact rescue us from a fate that is far more insidious, and far more dangerous.

Sister Joan Chittister, a Roman Catholic nun, is a deeply insightful spiritual guide and writer.

Reflecting on these themes of vulnerability, desolation and loss, she has this to say:

“We spend so much of our lives pretending to be God, it’s often difficult to remember that we aren’t.

We proclaim it to the office staff.

We remind the family of it by the day.

We ply friends with stories of our supernatural victories over small children and store clerks and neighbors.

Even early in the process when we go to prayer, we take with us the same attitude – of the imperious and the agitated.

We order people and things to do our bidding, hoping to make our worlds perfect.

We secretly expect God to act just like we do.

But then, somewhere in life, we find ourselves facing walls that will not move.

Someone we love needs special care – now – and will need special care for the rest of their lives.

We lose the savings of a lifetime and all the retirement plans that go with them.

We develop a chronic disease that doesn't end our life, but limits it severely.

We watch the business fail and there's not a thing we can do about it.

Suddenly, we become something new, and strange.

We become the spiritual beggars we never imagined becoming.

Except — even begging is useless now.

And we know it.

What do we pray for at a time like this?

In fact, why even bother to pray?

These questions matter.

Perhaps because there is nothing that teaches prayer more quickly, and more effectively, than feeling like there's no point to praying.

That desolate place when we are lost in the land of 'nowhere to go' — but to God.

It's the birthplace of wisdom.

That place where we find ourselves not seeking to change the circumstances of our lives — but seeking — at long last — to change our whole attitude about what life really is about.

We learn, in the throes of a heavy heart, that the grace simply to 'be' — may be the greatest grace of all.

We discover in the silent arms of God that it is better to simply be loved, to simply be accepted, than to be 'saved' from those things that are, ironically, their own kind of salvation.

It's true, isn't it?

'Sickness' saves us from glorifying the cosmetics of life.

'Need' saves us from isolating ourselves from the rest of the world.

The 'imperfections of others' saves us from self-absorption.

'Vulnerability' saves us from the sickness of arrogance.

Then, when we go to prayer, we go not to get something — but to be still.

To develop the heartbeat of acceptance.

To become the calm that truly calms.

Desolation creates humility, and humility creates listeners.

And in that listening, we find the soft, still voice of God." Joan Chittister, Breath of the Soul: Reflections on Prayer, modified.

That soft, still voice which assures us that, no matter your circumstances, no matter your pain, no matter your desolation, your true identity — is that of a child of God.

And even more, a beloved child of God.

Beloved by the child that God himself becomes.

Beloved by a God who knows every form of human difficulty, yet who promises NOT to rescue us from danger, but to be with us always, in the midst of every danger.

In the midst of every heart break.

In the midst of every calamity.

Beloved by the God who says to every human person,

"You are accepted.

You are accepted by that which is greater than you, the name of which you do not know.

Don't ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later.

Don't try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much.

Don't seek for anything; don't intend anything.

Simply accept the fact that you are accepted." Tillich.

This is a hard truth that not only needs to invade our minds, but it's the core truth that needs to invade, as the older testament says, our intestines and our kidneys.

It's a truth that can't be grasped without experiencing desolation, vulnerability and loss.

As I visited our friend Bob Nakata in his last few years, what I saw in this powerful man who was now absolutely vulnerable, absolutely dependent, was the joyful smile of a man who came to see that in

the letting go, in the release of all things, in the peeling away of the masks our egos create, was the shining essence of the man.

That essence reflecting the One in whom we are all made.

The One through whom we all live and move and have our being.

For there, in Bob's smile, was the face of God.

As the seeds of pain blossom into the sweet fruit of paradise.

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