

May 29: ON THE ROAD: PRESENCE

Luke 24:13-45; Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

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Is “presence” more psycho-babble than spiritual practice these days? I believe mystics claimed the term first, but in recent times “presence” has become a lot like the weather: everyone talks about it, but no one does anything about it. In our virtual- and cyber-oriented world, *presence* is a hot conversational commodity, having little to do with being face-to-face. One hears of parents “being present” to their children as they play, and it means more than “watching” them. Or spouses “being present” to one another in difficult times. And even employees “being present” to their work, bringing their best innovation to a project.

Everyone *talks* about presence, but I had a dickens of a time defining it for this sermon. While everyone agrees that there *is* such a thing, no one has a concise, accessible definition. What was I thinking, using it as a sermon title? Everyone agrees that, as a spiritual practice, presence is to be valued, that it’s more than just showing up. In secular parlance, presence is bearing or appearance. We *get* “presence of mind,” we understand that, as a practice presence is more than companionship. Metaphors help (What’s it *like?*). We can personally remember an instance of being completely and totally *there*, such as when you hook a feisty lunker of a fish and spend the next 15 minutes trying to reel it in without losing it. You are focused and attentive, both thinking and emoting. You are *present*. I knew I was *present* when my children were born. Those first few hours of falling in love with that miraculous little being—the intimacy and immediacy, the attentiveness. My dog is *present* when she knows I have a treat in my hand. Of course, knowing this quirk, I use it to my advantage to distract her when we meet other dogs or to give her room to control her reactions as we go around a blind corner or to

build in safe habits as we wait to cross the street. If Sadie is *present* to me, she's a better dog.

I think the reason we talk so much about “being present” is because of our cultural admiration for multi-taskers. We so easily dismiss, as either saints or slackers, those who only do one thing at a time. If you are *only* cleaning the house (and not also arranging the soccer carpool, finishing a project, pressing your pants for the meeting you're already late for, feeding the rest of the family). If you are *only* driving (and not also answering just this one call, checking the headlines in the paper, ticking off items on your to-do list). If you are *only* having dinner conversation (and not also texting while listening to your iPod). If you are *only* doing one thing—revolutionary or ineffective or Mother Teresa? I read this week that to lose weight, the first thing is to *only eat* when you eat. Don't eat standing up, while reading or watching TV, at your desk, while driving. Simply and only paying attention to what goes into your mouth is a bona fide weight loss technique. Conversation is OK, as long as your mouth isn't full.

When I was in a covenant group in Madison, we met every Sunday to check in, support and pray for each other. Life as a single mother, working fulltime in a demanding profession, actively volunteering at church, life was hectic. My prayer request was frequently, that I'd be present to my own life. Some of this is necessary, but there is only so much multi-tasking we can do before we lose our ability to be present. It is certainly possible to do a load of laundry while you are boiling the potatoes for supper, because machines are doing the work for you, and neither activity requires your active involvement until it's time to make them stop. But even computers only do one thing at a time. I have it on good authority that, when we think we're asking the computer to (for

instance) load something while we work on a document, the computer is still doing only one thing at a time, merely tucking the other function into pauses in the work of the first. It needs to create those pauses to comply with your request.

The Emmaus road story shows us the blessing and shadows of presence. God present to us in teaching and the sacrament of bread and wine. But the story also shows the shadow side of presence. Cleopas and his pal are present, but *what* they are present to gets in the way of the one Presence they desire. Present to their grief and disappointment, all they can see is lost hope, they can't see Risen Hope walking beside them. It is in the act of hospitality, breaking of the bread, that Jesus' presence becomes discernible to them. Jesus is present to us *as is*, knowing us as we are, not how we oughta be. Cleo and pal can only treasure the presence of Jesus in retrospective, as who they think he oughta be. His death was a problem to solve so the ministry can go on. They don't see it as a call for on their own lives.

Stephen's martyrdom is also a type of presence—God present even when things are going badly, God in suffering. We know this as a theological fact, but recently I heard someone's story of their loved one's serious medical adventure. After recounting the story, she told me how grateful she was for the experience. Gratefully, she spoke of God going before them, not because of the happy ending and God fixing up the whole thing, but her gratitude for the experience itself and God's presence in it. I would have been skeptical of her conclusion, but I had a similar experience after a terrible car accident. I was flooded by gratitude, not that I was alive and in one piece, but gratitude for the experience *itself*. This may have been what Stephen experienced, persecuted,

harangued, attacked, stones raining down on him. He saw it as the glory of God—God present to him, and he to God.

“What’s in it for me?” you may ask. “How do I get to that point, when in times of terrible trial, God is present to me and I to God?” The quick answer is “practice.” Build your “presence muscles” through small experiences of it. Like the author of the *Eat, Pray, Love*, who went to India to learn to meditate. Elizabeth Gilbert recounts how, after months of daily exercises in contemplative prayer, she experienced the presence of God one day. It didn’t happen every day after that, but it did happen that once. Not many of us have the luxury of going somewhere just to be present to God, of concentrating all day on experiencing the presence of God. But daily practice helps. Of just doing one thing at a time (within reason). I know someone who, as she cleans, prays for the people who will use the space. Some Eastminster volunteers have told me that when they see *only that person* in front of them, they experience presence. Try not over-booking your calendar to leave some time to practice presence. Some religious teachers call this doing only one thing at a time “mindfulness.” You can try this at home. We’re not being asked to die for our faith, as Stephen was, or as are some of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world. We are asked to *live* for our faith. Those little decisions we make about priorities and values express our beliefs through our actions. When we do things with mindfulness or attentiveness, when we are present to *just that moment*, we are living our faith.

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