

**‘Like a tree planted  
by water...’**

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## ‘Like a tree planted by water..’

About three months ago, our bishop fired a gun into his chest and took his own life. Less than two weeks later, the other shoe dropped: we learned about some of the circumstances that apparently led up to the suicide. Astonishment, disbelief, anxiety, guilt, anger, sorrow--all these feelings and more have coursed through us as we absorbed this shock and tried to grope our way toward some semblance of meaning.

Now by this point, some of you are rolling your eyes. *Are you kidding?* you may be saying to yourself. *Do I have to think once again about the bishop's suicide? Can't you give this a rest already? Isn't it time to forgive and forget, to put this tragedy behind us, and to get on with something else?*

Part of me feels the same way, too. It is natural and normal to want to turn aside from pain, especially when the pain seems senseless or overwhelming. We all need breathers, and times of refreshment and rest. But I am convinced that if we turn our attention too quickly from this tragedy, then we will miss the gifts that God is offering us in the midst of it. And that is what I want briefly to discuss--not the bishop's suicide nor his sexual misconduct, but rather the great work that God is doing now in our midst.

As I listen to my parishioners, students, clergy and to the movements of my own heart, what I hear again and again is this: all the doors of our lives have suddenly swung open. Long-buried memories have surfaced. Things which we had long forgotten and long set aside are suddenly coming back to us, infused with deep feeling.

### **Long closed doors swung open**

For some people, what has surfaced are memories of the suicides of family members or friends, or the memories of times when they themselves contemplated that grim choice; for others, it is memories of their parents' infidelities that have come surging into consciousness, or memories of their spouse's betrayals, or memories of their own unfaithfulness; for still others, memories of sexual exploitation or harassment have sprung forward, experiences of sexual violation that are crying out to be believed, crying out to be healed. Everything in us that we left behind to deal with at some other more convenient time--everything that we hid away because it was too messy or too painful or too embarrassing to admit--everything that we locked up somewhere inside ourselves simply because we didn't like it, and couldn't face it and didn't want it to be true--all these places in ourselves and in our lives have suddenly been opened up. And so, for the first time, painful secrets are at last being shared. Long-buried truths are being named and spoken. Hidden and long-buried angers and sorrows are flooding into the light of day.

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We should not flee from this moment, nor turn our backs upon it, nor run and duck for cover until the storm has passed and things can get back to the way they were; rather, we should embrace this moment with a grateful heart. In the midst of our anguish and loss and confusion, God is inviting us, both as individuals and as a community, to open ourselves as never before to the healing and transforming light of Christ.

There are three spiritual disciplines that can help make us disciples, followers of the light in the midst of a dark world.

The first is the discipline of *self-awareness*, that essential foundation of spiritual growth. Can we begin to notice very precisely what has been stirred up within us over these past weeks and months? Can we begin to give these inner responses our careful attention, not in order to judge or condemn ourselves, but rather in order to understand? As we speak, as we listen, as we go about our day, can we learn to notice what is going on inside us, with an attitude of gentle interest and curiosity?

For example, some of us have been startled to discover within ourselves a deep river of cynicism. We may hear that dark inner voice which warns that religion is all hypocrisy, nothing but empty formality and show, pious clichés that cover only emptiness, signifying nothing. We may be shocked to realize how cynical we are. If so, can we give that cynicism our full and careful attention? Do we notice the sadness that may be lurking behind it, the disappointment, the sorrow that a dream has died? Can we gaze upon our cynicism with great care and precision, and discover what lies beneath it?

### **Misplacing our own experience of faith**

**A**gain, over these past few months some of us have been surprised to realize that the anxiety we felt in response to Bishop Johnson's death stemmed in part from our reliance on the bishop's faith. Without being aware of it, we had wanted to borrow his faith as a substitute for our own. Our own faith may have felt deeply threatened when the bishop's faith wavered, for without knowing it, we had been living a secondhand faith. We had been counting on someone else's experience of the holy, rather than on our own personal encounter with the living God. Such self-awareness is precious, for it can propel us into a renewed search for an authentic faith, and for our own direct experience of God.

A second essential discipline is the discipline of *prayer*. When we pray, we let ourselves dwell in the presence of the one who created us in love, the one who calls us by name, who guides and accompanies us all our life long, and who embraces us and welcomes us at our journey's end. To pray is to let everything that is in us be touched by love--our cynicism, our cowardice, our laziness, our fearfulness--all of it. When we pray, we bring into Christ's presence all the corners of our lives, all the closets, the locked-up rooms, the dusty attic and the crowded basement. Gingerly at first, and maybe eagerly at last, we spread them out before Christ, and let his love touch and bless and change what is in us.

In the words of Jeremiah, through prayer we let ourselves "be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves stay green; in the year of the drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit." (Jeremiah 17:8 NRSV)

The third spiritual discipline is the discipline of *friendship*, the discipline of *community*. One of the extraordinary aspects of what has happened to us is that we have suddenly realized how

closely our lives are linked with one another's. Each of us feels our own particular response to the suicide and to the revelation of what preceded it, but all of us have been plunged together into a collective grief. Each of us is mourning in our own ways, but we all feel the wound. If we stay close to each other--if we tell the truth, speak our vulnerability, and voice our hope--if we listen with love to one another, and ask for help as we need it--if we pray for each other, and ask that God's love and mercy bless us all--then we can bear these things, and become companions in the faith at a deeper level of intimacy and spiritual power than we have ever known before.

*Self-awareness. Prayer. Community.* These are the disciplines that can help us enter into the great work that God is accomplishing among us.

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man." (Luke 6:20-22) As the Rev. Michael Dwinell pointed out at the gathering of diocesan clergy and lay leaders at the Campion Center several weeks after Bishop Johnson's death, these words of Jesus from his Sermon on the Plain are addressed to us in this time of upheaval and shock.

"Today, you and I are poor, indeed," commented Michael Dwinell. "Our trust has been taken. Our security has been taken. We are a mess, full of more feelings and contradictions than we can name." We are hungry. We mourn. In the eyes of the world, this is a terrible moment, a moment of humiliation and defeat, but in the eyes of God, this is a moment of truth, a moment that is sacred. It is when we know ourselves as heartbroken and poor and powerless that God can come among us in tenderness and power. It is when we know ourselves as empty that God can come to fill us.

"Blessed are you." The kingdom is very near.



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