

May 30, 2010
Trinity Sunday

My husband Manny has always been intrigued with cosmology; the study of creation, history and structures of the universe. Even while he was still an engineer, that was his “recreational” reading, and was partly what led him into teaching physics. And because he was interested in it, I started reading some cosmology (I just skipped the pages of mathematical equations).

He also started collecting pictures of the universe, photos taken from the Voyager space explorer and the Hubble telescope. These are truly amazing. Not only are they astonishingly beautiful, they open the door to an awareness of a universe that is grand beyond our capacity to comprehend.

The Voyager is the fastest space vehicle we have ever built. It would take about 2000 earth years for Voyager to travel one light year. Hubble has taken pictures of a formation called the Pillars of Creation, a “star nursery” that is 65,000 light years away – they are gas clouds 57 *trillion* miles high. The Clouds of Magellan, which are visible in the Southern Hemisphere, are the two galaxies closest to our own Milky Way – they are respectively 150,000 and 190,000 light years distant.

When the psalmist looked at the night sky he probably saw more stars than you or I – there was no light pollution to camouflage the most distant stars. Now think of the most spectacular night sky you’ve ever seen...can you picture it in your mind’s eye? Do you remember how it made you feel? Realize that with the naked eye we can see only about .001% of the 100 billion stars that make up our own rather small Milky Way galaxy – and there are *millions* of galaxies in the universe.

Think of it! At an absolute bare minimum, the number of stars in the universe is 1×10^{15} – that’s one with 15 zeros after it.¹

What are human beings that God should notice us? The children of earth, that God cares for us?

And yet not only does God take notice of us and care for us, but God came and took up residence with us, as one of us, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Not only does God stamp us with the divine image, but ignites and stimulates and sustains our lives by infusing and anointing us with a Holy Spirit.

Looking at that amazing night sky prompted the psalmist to praise – not only for the wonder and beauty of creation, but for the relationship God offers us.

¹ Actually I’ve been told since preaching this sermon that this number is by a factor of 15 – it’s more like 1×10^{39} .

Now, I have been awed into speechlessness very few times in my life, but it *has* happened. To see someone take their first breath – or their last – is an awesome experience, humbling and deeply emotional and moving beyond the ability of words to express. To fly over the Rocky Mountains and look down on the vastness of that range and to get a sense of the terrain left me awestruck. To receive an unexpected gift which was of great value to the giver and of greater thoughtfulness than I ever expected was awe inspiring and overwhelming. But to recognize that the God whose will brought forth the universe chooses to be in relationship with us – wow. Wow.

You know, I have always believed in grace, the idea that we are loved and accepted by God because God loves us, and not because of any efforts or goodness of our own – at least I always believed in it for other people. But for most of my life I didn't really, truly, completely believe God loved me unless I was working harder, doing more, unless I was the smartest girl in the class or the nicest person in the room, unless I was better than everyone else *at* everything else. And I could never quite manage that. There was always somebody better at something. Then when things went wrong, or they didn't turn out the way I wanted, I knew it was because somehow I was not worthy of God's blessing.

And because I hang around with religious types, when I complained, someone would remind me that all things work for good, and suffering produces endurance, produces character, produces hope and that it was a good thing.

I always hated that.

I always hated it when someone wanted to equate their suffering and pain with God wanting to teach them a lesson. Somehow it never quite squared with what I knew of the God who came to bring us life, joy, resurrection – I mean, couldn't God find a *nice* way to teach me a lesson?

Because we *have been justified* – brought into right alignment, proven acceptable to God by faith, we have peace with God. How often do we forget that THAT is the context in which Paul is speaking? What happens if we read it “backwards” from that basic understanding that *because of Jesus Christ* God has declared we are justified and living in and by and through grace?² What if God really and truly does love me just as I am without one plea, without anything to offer? What if my suffering isn't because God hates me or is punishing me or is trying to teach me a lesson? What if our misfortunes in life aren't a sign of shame, or guilt or weakness or deficiency, but they are survivable and even tolerable because we know, we trust that God loves us, cares for us, is mindful of us; that God has overcome the power of death to destroy us and has given us the power and potential to endure and persevere?

You know, our human response to pain and suffering (our own and that of others) is to run away, to hide, to try to filter pain and deaden it. We use drugs, food, chemicals, sex,

alcohol, amusement, cruelty, denial, and a multitude of different ways to try to avoid suffering and pain. But what if we didn't have to do that? What if we could face pain dead on?

When I served a congregation in New York, Ann and George were pillars of the church. He had had some heart troubles in the past, then had a devastating stroke. After a long hospitalization and longer rehab period he was able to come home, though he had to be in a wheel chair. Then he had to have a biopsy for cancer in his eye. I was worried about Ann, who was taking care of him through all this, worried how she was taking it and I asked her how *she* was doing. She said, "It is what it is. My worrying is not going to change it. If it's clear, it's clear. If it's cancer, we'll deal with it."

That's the attitude Paul is talking about. *When we are suffering we can still be joyful in our suffering (NOT *because* of suffering but *even though* we are suffering) because we know that our standing as beloved, cherished, treasured children of God is secured in God's promise. We have hope because we can trust that God's love is unconditional regardless of what is going on in our lives. We're not called to seek pain, nor to desire it, but the truth is that pain is part of life. When we try to avoid it, deaden it, deny, it mask it, for whatever reason, by whatever means, we are living less than the abundant life God offers us in Christ.*

Richard Sheffield, a Presbyterian pastor notes, "don't waste your pain...Our faith is not a matter of earning God's love, but of discovering God's faithfulness in loving us always."

Wow.

Wow.

What might we be able to say to a world that is devastated by war if we could live that message?

What could we offer a country poisoned by partisan bickering and refusal to listen receptively to other voices, so convinced are we of our own truth?

How might we restructure our communities to truly be commonwealths, where the needs and the good of all are considered in decisions and policies?

How could we offer hope and encouragement to friends and family who are so terrified of their pain, of our pain, that they are caught in traps of illusion, addiction, and half-lives?

John's gospel tells us that Jesus sends the Spirit to us to reveal truth – life as it is, not as we'd like it to be or think it should be...but life as it *can* be through the loving grace of God.

Andrea La Sonde Anastos writes that the Feast of Pentecost is the turning point that moves us from being observers to practitioners of faith. “In the long ‘green’ season, we have the annual opportunity to lay our choices alongside the plumb line of the teachings we have received from the one we call our Messiah. As disciples, God is active within us, between us, among us, offering to nurture us into greater maturity. If we are paying attention, we come to each Pentecost ready to learn more about service and faith...In the book of Revelation we are reminded that we are a realm or community of priests, each of us entrusted with the task of sanctifying space and time [and, I would add, pain and suffering] by our words and deeds...Part of creating that holiness with God is clearing away the clutter of illusion and speaking truth.”

When I consider the cosmos...what are we that God takes notice of us, cares for us, gives us Christ and Spirit? Yet the truth of the Incarnation, the truth of the Gospel is summed up in this...that God loves us that much.