

Many years ago, when I was in seminary, part of our training (if you will) was to spend 10 weeks in hospital ministry, known as CPE or (clinical pastoral education). CPE is open to students and ministers of all denominations; really on purpose so that you would inevitably experience challenge and conflict among one another (not unlike our presidential debates). Anyway, the idea was to force you to look at your image of God, your faith, your image of self and how all of that influenced the ministry you exercised with the patients you encountered.

As Catholic seminarians (there were three of us in this mixed group of Baptists, Lutherans, and Presbyterians) as Catholic seminarians we had been doing this kind of personal and spiritual formation, self-evaluation and critique since the day we entered seminary. To our surprise, it became evident that this was the **first** time the Protestant students had been required to do such a thing. This made for some interesting, tense, and shocking interpersonal review sessions.

In these sessions, you would sit with your small group and supervisor and process a “ministerial incident”: how you handled a particular visit to a patient, what you were thinking, what your fears were, how your belief system helped or hurt the situation, where you saw God present, how you made God present to that person, etc. And if it was your turn to present your incident, anything you said, did, or didn’t do was ***fair game*** for the rest of the group to challenge, compliment, or criticize. Sounds like fun doesn’t it? Well the reason I bring all of this up, is that my supervisor (who was fine man) had this phrase he would use when he sensed you were holding back or hiding something. And it was very similar to what Jesus says and does to Simon Peter in our gospel. My supervisor would say in those reluctant moments, “OK, now let’s go a little deeper.”

And deeper we went. The deeper we went, the more transformative these review sessions turned out to be, because you were forced to face and reveal the stuff deep down inside that makes you the way you are. This was especially true for the Protestants because they weren't used to doing it. We had one young man in our group who had obvious authority issues with a female peer. When we went a "little deeper" he revealed that he had been repeatedly abused, physically beat-up, and belittled by his ex-wife. Yes, ex-wife. Think how hard it was for him to reveal that to a group of three other men. To expose himself, his history, and very much his present true identity to a collection of strangers, albeit compassionate, supportive and encouraging men, but still by and large, strangers.

I'm not sure why he decided to trust us with such intimate and personal knowledge, but what he received was love, admiration, support, and encouragement to explore his hew-found ministerial identity, as the late great Henri Nouwen puts it, a "wounded healer." There was no laughter, ridicule, or shame; only a gentle push to believe and practice what he had experienced and learned from our group. This was a brave move on his part; and I hope that in revealing it, He experienced the openness and acceptance God offers all of us when we genuinely open ourselves to Him.

How hard it is for us to just face those things we keep hidden deep down within, that we are ashamed of, that make us seem weak, that we are afraid to let anyone know? The famous psychologist, Carl Jung, once said, “It is a terrible shock to become acquainted with oneself.” Part of the shock I think, is the fear, the “what-if” if someone actually knew or discovered this truth about me? “What if” it was out there in the open for everyone to know? How embarrassing? How terrifying? True, perhaps, when it comes to our less understanding peers. But when we turn to our faith, when we turn to God, perhaps we are even more terrified to reveal our darkest secrets to the one who can truly judge us.

This is an entirely human reaction. But the fact is, Our Lord already knows. This is the terrible shock Simon Peter, Paul, and Isaiah felt in our readings this evening/morning. They realized in an intimate and profound way, that the Lord knew the sinful men they were and the shameful things they had done; so much so they couldn't even bear to look the Lord in the face.

Simon Peter even tells Jesus to go away, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.” But Jesus’ response (the same as the Lord’s to Isaiah and Paul) is a stunning revelation. Jesus reveals that there *is* something that God cannot do. And that is, despite what we have done, He cannot turn away from us. As God’s own words confirm; there is nothing, nothing so terrible, shameful, or embarrassing we can do to make Him turn away from us.

This is simply a stunning revelation; a revelation that is so far from the image and opinion we have of ourselves, that it is often difficult to believe. But as Pope Francis has said; “God never tires of forgiving us.” Sacred Scripture confirms this time and time again. This is not an excuse, or “carte blanche” to do whatever we want and receive forgiveness later, as many Protestants accuse. Rather, this is a profound revelation to us by God himself, that if we are truly contrite, truly sorry for whatever we have done, yet would rather keep tucked away; if we bring it into the light of God’s merciful gaze, nothing can prevent him from forgiving us.

So Fear not! Whoever you are; whatever you've done: God will not turn away from you. Like Isaiah, Paul, and Simon Peter, when we finally come to realize the truth about God (that He does not dwell on our past indiscretions, but rather on what He can make of us moving forward), then there is nothing else to do but to be honest before Him who is Love, and go forward in faith and trust in enduring mercy.

In the sea-journeying words of the poet Walt Whitman, which capture this truth of God's mercy, as well as hope in and for us I believe: The poet says,

Bathe me, O God, in thee
I and my soul to range in range of thee.
Sail forth, steer for the deep waters only,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves, and all.
O my brave soul!
O farther, farther sail!
O daring joy, but safe! Are they not all the seas of God?
O farther, farther, farther sail!