

Walking Away

Proper 21, Year A, RCL. Philippians 2:1-13 (the kenotic hymn). September 25, 2011.
The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the
Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove

It was a quiet afternoon, the first day of autumn. I walked past the door of the bedroom and looked in. My wife had stretched out on the bed to read for a few minutes after lunch and had fallen asleep. She was enclosed by a warm pool of light from the bedside lamp, the book open on her lap, our little cat curled up beside her. It was a picture of comfort, rest and tranquility.

I stood there for a long time. I knew I had a thousand things to do. I was wide awake and motivated. But this was the balance, peace and happiness we all so deeply long for. It was hearth and home and rest for the weary; it was love and gentleness and hope.

But I had to go. I said nothing, made no sound, turned away—at the same time thinking “I can’t believe I’m actually turning away from this,” knowing as well as all of you do that people do it and have to do it all the time.

These moments of peaceful equipoise are always interrupted. The kids get in a tussle, the phone rings, the alarm goes off. But I could have stayed a long time. I could have made it last. But. I knew. I had. To go.

That’s happened to God. Yes, it has. It was Jesus who had to leave the room, leave the peace and the wholeness, go from where there was safety and rest. He had something to do. He knew he had to go.

My wife and our little cat did not vanish from existence when I left the room. I knew they were still part of my life, and that knowledge made a difference, as it always does. But to walk away—without repudiation but accepting another dimension of love—that too makes a difference. It says: “You matter to me, you will always matter, but I must go do some important thing without clinging to you. And I can do this all the better because I can be sure where my peace and joy and wholeness reside.”

God the Father Almighty and the Holy Spirit did not vanish from existence when Jesus left the room. But they became a part of his experience the way God is part of our experience. Only rarely (more so for some people than for others) does God so fill the place where we happen to be that we are certain all the way through of his comfort, strength and wisdom. To get as close to that as we can we have to have a habit of prayer much as Jesus had. When he went away by himself to pray, he was not back in the room with the other Persons of the Most Holy Trinity, but he was close enough to get the grace he needed..

You must be figuring out that I’m trying to say something about the famous passage in St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians about the self-emptying of Christ. It’s my favorite part of the Bible, and here it is among today’s readings. And what I’m trying to say is that when we turn from peace and joy, from comfort and wholeness that we can touch and hear and see and smell—as real as anything we can ever experience—when we turn from that because we have to and we know we have to and in a way we want to because we know that’s where the right path lies: When we do that we are close, ever so close, to what it means to say our Lord came down from heaven.

Here’s what Paul says: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as a thing to be exploited, but emptied

himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”
(Philippians 2:5-8, NRSV)

The Greek word translated as exploited could be translated as grasped, and the Greek word translated as slave could be translated as servant. This passage has always meant, to me, that we cannot serve love if we cling to, hold onto, won't let go of, the comfort and peace of belovedness. We cannot hang onto it simply for our own comfort and personal use. We have to walk away. There are times of rest and refreshment, yes, but then we are back to the weariness and riskiness of serving goodness in a broken world.

And yet...it's not entirely a crushingly burdensome sacrifice. I turned from the picture of peace that my sleeping wife presented with a twinge of regret and with a bit of resentment at the necessity of walking away, but also with a high heart, with energy, with motivation. It's to do love's good work that love sends us forth. God came among us more in joy than in wrath, with a high heart and a sense of humor, with memory, reason and skill. Jesus had a job to do, to do well, to do boldly, for love's sake and with love's power, led by the Holy Spirit and with his Heavenly Father at his back.

For love is stronger than death.

The light shines on in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it. (John 1:5)

We have jobs to do. Jesus is at our side. The Holy Spirit is swirling around us, blowing where it will, preparing the way. Our Heavenly Father is backing us up. We do not need to fear we will lose all gentle hope and wander where peace and healing cannot find us. God has always wanted to send us forth boldly and joyfully. He

always accepts our service. The cross is not the end of hope but the gate of glory. The sleeping beloved and the peaceable animal, gathered into a circle of light, are a foretaste of redeemed creation. That promise does not go away when we pay attention to our work. Trust God for it. The beloved's head rests on God's shoulder, and the cat is curled up on his lap.