

NYYM Bible Study

Thursday July 23, 2015

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Conflict, Shadow and Unity

The Shadow of the Cross and the Tomb

John 20:1-18

There is a phrase among Christians: the shadow of the cross. That seems a good place to start today as we continue our exploration of conflict, shadow and unity through the lens of the Bible.

There are many layers of meaning to this phrase – the shadow of the cross – but one thing that it seems to mean is that in the shadow of the cross, we experience the suffering and evil that Jesus experienced. We see his suffering. We see the world's suffering. We see our part – individually and collectively – in perpetrating the suffering, in contributing to that suffering and in living with our own suffering.

And another thing it seems to mean – and this is part of the mystery and paradox – is that in the shadow of the cross, in the shadow of that evil, is our redemption, our healing – individually and collectively. When we go into the shadow, the shadow of the cross and the shadow of our selves, we find what is real. And by grace, we find we can accept what is real – the good things, sure. And also, the not so good.

So for me – that means that when I came in the door today, I again brought with me the fragile and needy little girl who craves your approval. I also brought with me – and this one is harder for me to admit to – the judgmental and arrogant part of me.

In the shadow of the cross, it is all welcome. It is okay to bring all of us, all of our shadow parts, to the foot of the cross, into the shadow of the cross. And not only is that just *okay* – it will be good when we come to understand that, as hard as we try to hide our uglier parts, the more they want to show up. And they show up in ways that are sometimes quite mortifying.

The paradox is that when we are able to do that – able to bring *all* of who we are – those not-so-pretty parts are redeemed. Healed. Loved. Welcomed. We can then be more fully our whole selves. Or at least – I *think* that's what happens; it seems to be the promise and the hope. And we find it in the shadow of the cross.

And here's another thing: It seems that we can see more clearly – yes, see *more* clearly, IN the shadow! – what those shadow parts have to teach us. So, for example, when I welcome that morally superior judgmental shadow in, I have come to see that the judgmentalism comes from a place of my deep desire. I get judgmental when I am feeling vulnerable around my desire. Being judgmental shifts the focus from my vulnerable need and desire – *to* – something out there that is not as I want it to be.

Something that Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians speaks, I think, to this shadow work. He writes about the parts of the body that are weaker – and that could be interpreted to refer to our shadow parts. Here’s what he says:

“The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”

What we can understand from this is that we need to treat our weaker parts – our shadow parts – with honor and respect and kindness. And we need to know – truly *know* – that our shadow parts are indispensable.

This is *key* – our shadow parts are *indispensable*. Which is why we really need to each individually do our work in the shadows, and submit as we are able to Spirit’s work in us in our shadow places. Because if we don’t, then what we bring to conflict will more likely be destructive and hurtful – to us, to others, to the community; and less likely to lead to unity. Because remember – no matter our efforts to hide or shush them, our shadow parts come with us. They *will* make themselves known.

One way to check out whether your contributions to your community are an acting out of the shadow self is to simply ask that question – before you say or do something, or as soon as possible afterward: *Is this coming from my shadows?*

And to sit with that and see it as honestly and as clear-eyed as you can. This can happen in meditation, in Quaker worship, in prayer, in any number of ways. And if you can do it with a trusted friend or guide, all the better. But we need to do it. Because in some way we need to begin to know what we don’t know that we don’t know. That’s confusing, I know – but the question is, how do you know what you don’t know? We need to keep bringing that into prayer, reflection, meditation, discernment – with a heart open and willing to step into the shadows.

And when we do... well, our Bible passage today will give us an idea of what we may find.

Read:

John 20:1-18

What does this story reveal about shadow and unity?

What do you think this story shows us about shadow and its relationship to conflict and/or unity?

How is this material working in you? What is God revealing to you?