

2023, March 1

Novena of Grace Reflection

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God is the light that shines in the darkness. And for me, in today's readings, the aspect of God that shines most brightly is God's total, radically inclusive love...radically loving inclusivity. What matters to God is a pure, sincere, open heart, not a pedigree and the entitlements that go with it.

A heart contrite and humbled, O God, you will not spurn.

In our first reading, the people of Nineveh do not have the right pedigree; Jonah most certainly looked down upon them as "other," as "heathens," and had God not SENT him to deliver a message, he would probably never have gone there.

The Ninevites received God's message with open and contrite hearts, and God not only spared them, but as Jesus reveals in today's Gospel, God embraced the Ninevites so fully that he elevates them (as well as the Queen of the South, who was another foreigner) to where they will be with God "at the Judgement" to condemn the entitled, pedigreed insiders (including Pharisees). The "evil of this generation" Jesus refers to is the closed and judgmental hearts of the entitled, pedigreed insiders who were about to crucify him, the Light, the Son of God.

I see the message in today's readings being about God's light that shines in the darkness of alienation, shame, feeling othered, feeling like a misfit who doesn't belong, feeling not good enough, unlovable, damaged, unforgiveable, never expecting to fully belong, never expecting to really have a seat at the table.

God always has a seat at the table waiting for us.

I'm a psychologist on a PTSD Team where I walk with veterans on their journeys of healing from traumas that they may have never been able to talk about with anyone, veterans who have served and have been harmed by institutional betrayal, moral injury, racism, other isms, traumas, horrors, and losses they did not ask to experience, participate in, or witness.

I'm also the daughter of a World War II era Ukrainian refugee, and grew up among Ukrainian refugees, many of whom had experienced Holodomor, one of the atrocities humans have done to humans. I was not born in the US, and English is not my first language. So, I had plenty of experiences that sensitized me to belonging vs. not belonging and gave me familiarity with the distrust of people who have been harmed by evil. It's no wonder that I felt right at home with the work I have been doing for over 25 years now.

But I couldn't have been doing this work joyfully all these years if I hadn't had a very personal encounter with the Light that shines in the darkness. And this is what I'd like to share with you today.

The back story is that for the first 22 years of my life, the place where I found my sense of belonging and security was academics. I was wildly successful as a student. By the time I realized at the end of college that my professors had groomed me to become the world's expert in an inconsequential, narrow, navel gazing field of study in the cult of academe, and that over the course of three years, this cult had severed my sense of connection to my family and my faith, I felt utterly and completely disconnected and without direction. The Light was a tiny, distant flicker. I needed to go into the wilderness to rediscover the Light—literally into wilderness—mountaintops and vast desert terrain. And I needed to go on an extended solo journey (looking back on it, much like a Jesuit Mission), to shake the legacy of anxiety about simply surviving—food, shelter, safety-- that I had inherited.

So, I bought a one-way ticket to Anchorage, took an old bicycle, camping gear, three days of food, and the 8 dollars I had left, and set off into the unknown with a vague plan of working in a cannery to earn enough to buy food for several months of journeying. My journey started in June of 1987. By early August, I had worked two months of 80-hour weeks for \$4.40 an hour at Clark's Point, working alongside mostly Vietnam veterans. I'd also had a weeklong solo wilderness adventure with close encounters with grizzlies, Elk, and Salmon at Katmai. By September, I was starting work in a cannery in Valdez, living in my tent in the "gravel pit" outside the cannery initially, and then up on Hippie Hill.

Around the campfire after work one day, having had no female company for weeks, I felt a wave of homesickness and longed for something that would remind me of home. I turned around and there was a young woman my age, who introduced herself as Doris. Doris had the very unique accent of my mother's region, and she was born in the same city, Graz, where I was born. This seemed like a miracle.

A half year later, I was back home in New York, working an ordinary job, and on a Saturday happened to be sitting on a park bench in Washington Square Park watching the street performers, reflecting on my Alaska experiences, longing for some revitalization of that amazing half year that seemed a universe away. I turned around, and there was Doris—Doris with my mother's accent, born in Graz, who had shown up in Alaska when I was homesick. She was just passing through New York for that one day.

This was only one of many small miracles during that half year odyssey from Alaska down to Guatemala and back to New York—of people crossing my path and appearing again, just when I needed them. I came out of that half year feeling a deep connection with all of creation, feeling the Holy Spirit at work in my life and others' lives--and as one of our earlier Novena speakers spoke of widening the tent--a trust in God's tent being really, really wide. A trust that God sees the spirit of the law as more important than the letter of the law. And whatever prohibitions I had before that to pursuing a career in psychology melted away. My sense of meaning and direction became clear and strong, and I got busy preparing for graduate school in this new field of study.

It was still years before I found St. Ignatius. My father's last wish was for me to baptize my son in the Catholic Church. I did, Father Tom and Father Craig welcomed me, and I stayed, and my son stayed all the way through confirmation with Father Billy and music with Joseph.

Over the years there have been many crossroads and challenges in my life. Through them I have never again felt alone. And whenever I really need help, I remember this half year of miracles and I reach out and God provides, usually in the form of a person or people.

To conclude, I'd like to return to my opening words: God is the light that shines in the darkness. And God's light is radically inclusive love...and

radically loving inclusivity. What matters to God is a pure, sincere, open heart, not a pedigree.

There are many people right now who are contributing to the brokenness of the world, but my hope is strong because there are so many more people right now who are contributing to the healing of the world and we come from all corners and we can join together and amplify the Light, God's Light that shines in the Darkness.