

13 May 2008
Inside the New Gate
Old City, Jerusalem

Dear Friends,

I'd intended to write a letter just once a week – but that proves to be impossible. So rich, startling and powerful are my experiences in this Holy Land...I need desperately to reflect, to think, to muse. I've filled a notebook with musings – in just a week and a half's time. But I find that my letters home help me to go deeper, to dig, to linger in the mysteries and epiphanies of an unprecedented journey.

So, you'll forgive me for writing more frequently. I trust you'll remember that these are notes to myself as much as notes home. We learn together.

On Sunday, I caught a bus from Nazareth into Tiberias, and then caught another from Tiberias up the western edge of the Sea of Galilee. It was a stunning day, bright and warm, and I climbed the steep path that leads from the lake itself to the Mount of Beatitudes. Thought to have been the site where Jesus taught his disciples, the mount is now crowned by a lovely church within which the 8 beatitudes are featured, on glass, in Latin.

The church itself offers a spectacular view of the lake below, the golden fields and hills, the east side beyond. It's not hard to imagine the land and the fields as they were 2000 years ago, an inspired setting for some of the most significant teaching in human history. I spent a couple of hours simply sitting on a stone, beneath two shady trees, reading and re-reading the Sermon on the Mount, trying to make sense of bird songs, and sitting in contemplative prayer. Not a bad way to spend a Sunday afternoon.

And yet, something was missing. I'm not sure what; maybe I was expecting a more dramatic experience, a revelatory moment on Jesus' turf. I had a lovely afternoon, but not the dramatic one I'd hoped for.

Riding another bus yesterday, a crowded one from Nazareth down to Jerusalem, I continued my reading of Merton & Sufism. It's a collection of

articles around Thomas Merton's deep affinity for Sufism and Islam and the ways that affinity shaped his Christian mysticism. It's been a great gift to me, especially now and particularly here. And yesterday, I came upon a passage that opened my heart to Sunday's disappointment:

“Many Sufis maintain that true understanding of God can only be achieved through perplexity and bewilderment. The paradoxical and sometime scandalous utterances that tend to emerge as a result are simply the outward manifestation of inner awe, wonder, and astonishment, which render the rational mind incapable of employing its usual care and precision. According to some Sufis, bewilderment in the face of God's reality is in fact the highest stage of human understanding. One of their favorite expressions of this perplexity in God is... ‘Incapacity to perceive is perception.’”

Bumping along in a crowded bus, I wondered if this Sufi teaching doesn't capture the sweet essence of Jesus' first and most important beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In bewilderment, in astonishment, my spirit opens, just a bit, to the amazing mysteries and graces of God. I may climb many a mountain and seek on every one the clarifying precision of revelation. But the more important thing is to sit among the birds, to rest beneath the trees, to listen carefully to the voice of Jesus; and, there, to be astonished, bewildered and poor in spirit.

Here in the Holy Land, paradox is everywhere; it is the ground of all being, the history of all cultures, perhaps our future as well. So much beauty, so much pain; so much praise, so much fear. It's bewildering! I find that I'm overwhelmed with gratitude – a good bit of the time now – for my life, for this journey, for the shade beneath which I write these words. Even so, I remind myself that all of it is fleeting, impermanent; I cannot own it or cling too tightly to any of it. My life. This day. The shade. All of it, impermanent. Fleeting.

I'm stunned by this, bewildered beyond belief, incapable of knowing much about the God behind and in it all. And this, paradoxically, is my

beginning, the seed of a life that is not so fleeting, not so impermanent, not at all meaningless. God finds me in my astonishment. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” he says. Blessed are the bewildered.

Today I spent another afternoon with Sheikh Ghassan of the Sufi Center in Nazareth. He and his son Abed were in Jerusalem for two days of study. The sheikh has been so gracious and so kind during my stay thus far.

We went first to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the site where many believe Jesus was crucified, then anointed for burial, buried and raised from the dead. This afternoon, there were hundreds of pilgrims moving in and out, dropping to their knees to weep and pray, waiting in line at stations within. Sheikh Ghassan reminded me of the strange historic rivalries within the Church, as different Christian communions have jockeyed for control. Because of this, and because of Caliph Omar’s affection for the site in the 600s, a local Muslim family maintains possession of the keys to the Church, even to this day! Every night, the Muslim family locks up; every morning, they open the doors so that Christians can do their thing!

Again, my new Muslim friend guided me through one of Christianity’s holiest sites. We stepped into the deep basement where many believe Jesus was buried. We climbed steps to the spot where many believe he died on a cross. Again, the sheikh reminded me how important Jesus is to him, to his faith. “A prophet,” he said. “We call upon him for light.”

We sat for a bit in the huge nave, beneath bright mosaics depicting scenes from the four gospels. I told the sheikh and his son about my recent reading, about my evolving appreciation for the Sufi masters and their teaching. In particular, I mentioned Merton’s attraction to the notion of a secret within each one of us, a secret only God can know.

“The secret of man [sic] is God’s secret; therefore, it is in God. My secret is God’s innermost knowledge of me, which He alone possesses. It is God’s secret knowledge of myself in Him, which is a beautiful concept. The heart is the faculty by which man knows God and there Sufism develops the heart.”

Thomas Merton, 1968
2 months before his death

Sheikh Ghassan was happy to talk about these things, delighted. He told me about the struggle within the Sufi, the self-purification, the lifelong practice of releasing desire and living for the other and overcoming ego's grip. With some hesitation, I asked about "jihad," if the true meaning of "jihad" had something to do with the struggle he described.

"Yes! Yes!" he exclaimed. "The Prophet – peace be upon him – had just this kind of greater "jihad" to teach. Each of us can overcome selfishness, find only love within; and this way, we get closer, closer, closer to the unique secret of God within our hearts." He added, interestingly, that committing one's life to the common good – hello, COPA leaders – has everything to do with the greater "jihad."

I had to step aside, for just a moment, to breathe and to remember where I was. A few yards away, an old woman was sobbing over the site where they apparently anointed Jesus' body for burial. And I was having a conversation, there, with a devout Muslim around the merits of "jihad." Go figure! I was in one of Christianity's holiest sites – that spot where many believed Jesus has risen from the dead – and again a Sufi Muslim sheikh was prying my heart open to the Spirit's deepest truths. Talk about bewildering! Astonishing!

Later, we sipped tea in the Muslim Quarter, and through a huge archway I glimpsed the stunning Dome of the Rock. The sheikh and his son stepped away for a moment, just across the alley and into a bookshop. When they returned, they presented me with a copy of The Holy Qur'an, in Arabic and in English. Such a gift from such dear people. I've invited them to visit us in Santa Cruz.

Just before I left FCC on this sabbatical, my friend Art Schuller gave me a huge hug and said, "Come back empty!" It sounded wise, but I confess to a certain confusion about it. What possibly could he mean? Didn't he realize how full my life would be those next four months?

Sipping tea with Ghassan and Abed in the Muslim Quarter, leafing through the Qur'an, wondering about "jihad" and "secrets" and "resurrection," I think have a hunch now what Art was getting at. I am so full of feelings now, so full of relationships and hope and pain and grace, so full of curiosity and humility, so full of my own weakness and my own courage – so full that I am more aware than ever of how empty I am. I am simply a vessel, simply an empty vessel, no more than that, and I guess no less. The more I see here, the more folk I meet, the more I honor and revel in such emptiness.

I'm afraid this is a meandering, wandering and all-too-philosophical piece of pulp. Take it for what it's worth. I continue to be so grateful for my friends back home and for your patience in following all my travels. This sabbatical is proving to be every bit the gift I'd hoped it would be. And all of you have a role in making it so!

I'll write soon, you can be sure.

Yours in faith and courage,

Dave