

Recreated in Love
Isaiah 65:17-19
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St. John United Methodist Church
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Some say that we can know something of the heart of God by looking into all that is good in the heart of humanity. If this is true then certainly we can examine all the wonderful creativity of the human mind and heart and conclude that God loves to create! God is a cosmic artist who takes delight in creating order out of chaos, and beauty out of the most unlikely places and people.

But God is not a one-time Creator. God never gets bored with creation. God did not set the universe in motion and then sit back and watch it like a clockmaker winding up a clock and letting it tick. United Methodists are not deists. We see God as dynamic and moving, always creating and recreating. It's almost as if God isn't satisfied, that God is always interested in improving the art God is creating.

One of the truths central to my understanding of God and the human heart is that God created all humans with an inner space, a void if you will. This space is not a physical space although many attest to feeling its joys and pain in certain parts of their bodies. It is primarily a spiritual space. And God created it within you and me and all people. God's hope is that we will allow that space to be filled with God, with Love with a capital L. This is because God wants to love us and be loved by us, to be in relationship with us. Filling our inner space with God's self is how God loves us.

But there is a catch. God doesn't force God's self into that space. We must choose to fill it with Love. The problem of the human condition is that we are so easily tempted to fill it with things and people and ideas other than God. There are people today whose inner space has been filled to the brim with material things. We love our clothes, our homes, our toys so much so that they become our security blankets. We want them to give us a sense of comfort and security. We subvert God's creative work in us when we become addicted to such things.

We also fill this inner space with food, with sex, with drugs and alcohol. The reason we do this is that there comes with this God-created inner space, a pain. It is a spiritual ache inside us that we try to avoid. As much as my wife loves me I know that she cannot meet my every need. Even if I am totally fulfilled in my marriage the ache is still there. This is by design for it reminds us of our need for God. Despite all the power and control and things we have gained, we still need God. It doesn't matter who you are or what you have accomplished in this world. You need God.

All this is to say that you and I need times of re-creation, time when we empty the cup that is our soul of all the junk we put in there. This season of Lent is such a time to empty our cups so we can feel the inner ache and be filled with the love and grace of God. Having just returned from a period of re-creation I have been reflecting on how our vacations can or cannot contribute to God's work of recreating our souls. If you want to cooperate with God's work of re-creation I have four observations.

First is to be realistic. I have to say that being realistic can be difficult when you've had absolutely no real experience in an endeavor. What happens when we have

no real time experience is that we rely on what others say. My parents invited their adult children and their spouses to join them on a 7-day cruise to the Caribbean. Kim and I flew to South Carolina and joined my brother and his wife as we sailed south towards the tropical sun. I had absolutely no real experience on a cruise and therefore a poor idea of what to expect. Somewhere in my mind though I imagined sitting on a white beach looking out on a turquoise ocean with two palm trees held up by beer bottles! In the absence of any prior experience my mind defaulted to images of a tropical paradise provided by popular culture, in this case, TV advertising. I didn't think about the reality of a queasy stomach sailing through 8 foot seas for 24 hours!

The point is that the reality of our vacations often don't measure up with how we imagined them to be. Two years ago when I took a sabbatical and drove my truck camper outside I have to say that the best part of that trip was not actually going on the trip, but dreaming about it.

The second way to allow our vacation time to be re-creation time is to be aware of the transition from work mode to vacation mode. Some talk about it in terms of decompression. When you have been in a situation of pressure and you move into an environment like a cruise ship where there is no pressure it takes time to adjust.

Some people are like this balloon in work mode. They move into vacation mode but still maintain the pressure of work mode. What we need to do is slowly let out the pressure so we can relax. The reason for this is that most if not all of the spiritual artistry God does in our lives enters our awareness when we are NOT in a pressure situation. Yes, God is in the pressure cookers of life, the big storms. But we hear God's still, small voice when all is quiet. If our vacations are to be spiritually renewing we need to put ourselves in a mode of being so we can hear the voice of God.

The third thing I learned on this cruise was to breathe deeply. Do you remember experience of breathing deeply after stepping outside after a fresh rainfall? Or the smell of freshly baked bread? Or the way homemade dish simmers on the stove? I know exactly why I buy Old Spice deodorant and cologne. The smell reminds me of my dad. Certain smells have a way of reminding us who we are. What smells remind you of who God is creating you to be? Such spiritual smells are not to be whiffed quickly. They are to be taken into our lungs and into our minds and hearts. What smells contribute to the growth of your soul? Do you know what they are?

And what is the capacity of your lungs to breathe deeply? Most of us do not use the full capacity of our lungs. We are content with shallow breaths. But it is possible to expand your lung power. The key is to become aware of your breathing. Then when you are at the apex of a breath, you breathe in a bit more, hold it more a few seconds before exhaling. Then when you are the bottom of exhaling and you think you have breathed out your last bit of air, you force some more out, hold it for a few seconds before inhaling. This little exercise, by the way, is a great way to begin your prayer time. Breathing deeply can help us relax on vacations, deal with stress, and bring us into deeper communion with God.

The fourth way to have our vacations be good for our souls is to savor the moment. To savor is to fully appreciate, to enjoy completely. Do you know what it is like to so completely and fully appreciate a symphony or a piece of art or a sunset that there is no room for any more joy?

On the cruise there were many workers attending to our needs. The cabin stewards cleaned our rooms daily, turned down our beds at night, and created playful animals using bath towels. Most of the workers were from the Philippines. At dinner we asked them about their stories. One girl named Cherry, was working for ten months on the ships to send her brother and sister to school back home in the Philippines. My mother asked her, "You all seem so happy in your work." Cherry replied with a smile and twinkle in her eye, "Of course, madam. We are Philippino." I wondered if Americans have the reputation of being a happy, servant people.

Another Philippino man, Roger, told us about his daughters back home. One of them was 14 and he hadn't seen her in awhile. In my poor attempt at humor I said, "I've raised four teenagers. My advice to you is to not go home until she is 20!"

By contrast the cruise director told us a true story of one woman who could not savor a positive moment. This woman complained about everything including the rocking motion of the ship. The staff get their share of strange questions such as, "How far above sea level are we?" Well this woman asked, "Where does the crew sleep?" Playing with her the director told her that a helicopter comes each night to pick up the crew and take them to a hotel. The next day the woman filled out an evaluation card and complained that she could not sleep due to the noise of the helicopters!

Savoring moments are not only for vacations. They happen while in Sunday worship or gazing at Denali bathed in alpenglow while waiting at a traffic light. They come to us while caressing our newborn baby or holding the well-worn hand of a faithful spouse. To savor life is to fully enjoy life. Who here can say that they already have enough joy?

Author Roger Swain wrote, "Living in the fast lane means being chronically short of both time and breath. When you have to gulp your air there is no time to savor it, no time to let it linger in the nose. You might as well try to listen to music wearing earmuffs or look at art from behind dark glasses. We live in a world whose odors are as rich and varied as its sights and sounds, but those who rush through it end up smelling nothing beyond their own sweat. To slow down is to discover that, in more ways than one, you smell better."¹

Author Mike Singenstreu writes, "Prayer is the natural cry of a child for a parent. Like breathing, it is not a problem to be worked out, but an experience to savor. Birds sing simply because they have a song. Prayer isn't something one does because it is a good thing to do. Prayer, like the song, is sung because that is why we were created."²

Yes, our God is a wonderfully creative God who delights in creating and re-creating...YOU. You are the clay. You are the canvas. What thing of beauty will God and you create this coming week?

¹ _Roger B. Swain, *Saving Graces: Sojourns of a Backyard Biologist* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 29.

² —Mike Singenstreu, "God is home; Prayer is always a local call," *The Victoria Advocate*, July 5, 2003, Victoriaadvocate-proxy.nandomedia.com.