

Gospel - John 20: 19-23

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 5.31.20

Patti Case



When I was a little girl, I would sometimes wake up from a beautiful dream and I would try to situate myself in my bed just so, endeavoring to get back to that euphoric feeling that I enjoyed just before the bubble popped.

Alas, that never worked. Mostly I would start to feel the wrinkles in the sheets and whatever ruckus my sister was making on the other side of our room. That wonderful feeling was here and gone, like a rainbow or a beam of sun in a Northwest spring.

I still experience that feeling. And no, I am not 'filled with new wine.' I imagine you experience it, too. In fact, I am experiencing the feeling more and more these days. I would go so far as to say I'm working hard to enjoy those euphoric moments. All the time.

Thin places.

A thin place is a term borrowed from the ancient Celts. It describes a place in time where the space between heaven and earth grows thin and the Sacred and the secular seem to meet.

It may interest you to know that the Celts believed that time was not linear, but spiral. So a thin place was not just beyond time, but beyond space and actually re-forming space.

Maybe that's too "woo-woo" for you. I'm afraid I have a little trouble wrapping my head around it. If time is a spiral, am I on the way up or on the way down? And is my husband in the same spiral, or the one above me, or below me? I scratch my head over the concept of re-forming space, but the more I think about it, the more I want to explore that idea. My idea of thin places is evolving.

I equate thin places with the vital presence of the Holy Spirit.

Thin places, for me, are moments in time when I feel just that much closer to God. The first time I experienced a thin place here at St. David's was when I was singing the Exsultet during Easter Vigil. The second year, not the first. I found myself in a place. Lifted up, suspended between you all and heaven. It was an amazing sensation and it continued at some level through the entire service and beyond.

The bubble finally burst, but I was able to capture and retain that euphoria for a good hour or so. That's a lot better than I was able to do as a little girl.

I have experienced thin places many, many times since. Singing certain songs. Sometimes playing a haunting tune on the flute. During the Nicene Creed, the Prayers of the People, the Lord's Prayer, those familiar moments in conversation with God. During the Consecration. Sometimes as I give a sermon, that feeling will come upon me. Sometimes, sitting in silence, alone in this sacred place.

Do we have to wear a robe to experience thin places? Do we even have to be in church? No. Thin places are moments when the ordinary becomes the extraordinary.

Jocelyn A. Sideco is a retreat leader, spiritual director and innovative minister who specializes in mission-centered ministry. Beyond special places, she also describes these moments: "Daily around 3:30 a.m., my first, second and third sips of my freshly brewed coffee, when I hear the phrase "let us pray," when I hear the silence, or when I see the laughter emerging from my daughter's face. Thin places create a home for the space between us, this mystery, to envelop us."

Is it that simple? Drinking coffee can put me in a thin place? By chugging caffeine, I am infused with the Holy Spirit? Maybe that's your thin place. Maybe not. I'll admit that I'm more apt to find a thin place in that first morning breath of fresh, outdoor air. Where do you find them? And can you find more of them? Maybe a forest, or a garden. Maybe the moment you settle into your comfy chair at home. Maybe, as I experienced so long ago, that moment between sleeping and waking. How many times can you experience that feeling? In a month? A day?

Consider the words of our Gospel today:

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Set aside the fact that, in these pandemically-immersed days, the thought of anyone breathing on us takes on sinister meaning. Instead, remember, if you haven't experienced it in a while, that amazing, special feeling when you walk up to a friend or a family member and hug them. Really hug them. And you stay there with that loved one, close enough and long enough to feel the warmth of that person's warm breath on your shoulder. You feel safe. You feel loved. You share something so precious.

Maybe you have lost a loved one, and you haven't shared that experience in a while. Maybe you're isolated and don't have anyone to hug right now. Does that mean that you can't experience that love? Does it mean that you can't go to a thin place, and stay there?

Judy Ogden gives great hugs. I have probably taken those hugs for granted these many years. Judy stopped by the church Friday to bring the lessons to put in this binder for me to read this morning. Kelsey and I were practicing, and we chatted for a moment. At the end of our conversation, Judy said, "Hugs!" From about 15 feet away. And I felt it. I felt it all evening. I felt it yesterday. I feel it now. I hope you do, too.

Thin places are ours to create and hold. But they don't have to be quite so ephemeral, moving like rainbows the moment we reach them. Stay in that place, fill up on it. Be. And then share that with others. Just --that. That is the power of the Holy Spirit. When we share the indescribable feeling that our close relationship with God creates in us, the Holy Spirit creates an energy that can change the world. That's the wind. That's the divided tongues of fire. That's Jesus Christ. Breathing on us. We share, and we create more.

Remember that folk song, Pass it On?

"It only takes a spark

To get a fire going

And soon all those around

Can warm up to its glowing

That's how it is with God's love

Once you've experienced it

You spread his love to everyone

You want to pass it on."

I read something from the Office of the Bishop the other day. His greeting, "Dear Ones," always used to seem a bit trite. Now, it gives me shivers. Dear Ones seems to illustrate his love for each one of us, whether he knows us or not, and I feel that love in those two simple words. Dear Ones.

What's changed? Bishop Rickel has used that greeting for years. But suddenly, just in the past couple of months, I receive it differently. I have suspended judgment (Thank you, God!) and have accepted God's love in this simple greeting from a church leader. And that has allowed me a new glimpse into a thin place where I can go. And be. And stay. And share.

We can kindle the Holy Spirit from less than wood scraps and flame. We can kindle the Holy Spirit simply by accepting God's love and reflecting it.

Our second lesson today, from the Acts of the Apostles, describes such moments:

In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

In the parlance of the church seasons, we will enter "ordinary time" next week with Trinity Sunday. But "ordinary time" should not be ordinary. We celebrate Pentecost for 25 Sundays this year. We have until December to make this "ordinary" time extraordinary. Let's not waste it.

Find your thin places. Feel the breath. Pass it on. Change the world.

Amen.