

THE HANDS OF LOVE or, OUR SOUL'S VISIT

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Plymouth Congregational Church
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Text: Psalm 36:5–10; Ecclesiastes 6, selected verses; Matthew 11:28–30

Bruce Chatwin, the English novelist and travel writer of the last century, tells this brief, but poignant, story:

A white explorer in Africa, anxious to press ahead with his journey, paid his porters for a series of forced marches. But they, almost within reach of their destination, set down their bundles and refused to budge. No amount of extra payment would convince them otherwise. They said they had to wait for their souls to catch up.¹

Though I have heard variations on Chatwin's story before, I found it written down in a book entitled, *The Soul of the World: A Modern Book of Hours*—a collection of eclectic reflections and stunning photographs from around the world. In the preface to this *Modern Book of Hours*, Phil Cousineau, the editor, writes:

The soul is the name for the unifying principle, power, or energy that is at the center of our being. To be in touch with soul means going back to the sacred source, the site of life-releasing energy, the activating force of life, the god-grounds...²

To echo the African porters, to be in touch with soul, I think, means that sometimes we simply need to sit down...and refuse to budge...and wait for our souls to catch up.

Over the course of my first five years in pastoral ministry in the small, rural village of Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia, there was a handful of times when I found myself in the midst of a most disconcerting experience on a Sunday morning during worship. (It is a serious act of trust that I dare to share this experience with you! Let me assure you before I tell you of this most disconcerting experience, that I have not yet had it here!). I would be presiding at the front of the sanctuary. Following the *Prayer of Confession*, I would offer *Words of Assurance*. As I looked out over the congregation, speaking words of God's boundless love and mercy and tender forgiveness, I found myself silently thinking:

I hate all of you! You're making me crazy!

¹Bruce Chatwin in *The Soul of the World: A Modern Book of Hours*, edited by Phil Cousineau (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993).

²Phil Cousineau, *ibid.*

The first time those words went through my mind, I was horrified...but, thankfully, it didn't take long for me to realize that those words were running through my mind because I was teetering on the edge of exhaustion. I had been working far too many hours, and playing far too few. I was utterly depleted emotionally and physically and spiritually. I needed desperately to sit down...to refuse to budge...to wait for my soul to catch up with the frantic pace my body was keeping.

Each Sunday, when those words silently uttered themselves unbidden, I would finally be pushed to reorganize the week that lay ahead to make room for stillness and rest. As surely as I did, when the next Sunday came, the congregation and I would pray together the *Prayer of Confession*, after which I would look out over the very same congregation, a collection of the very same individuals as the week before. And speaking *Words of Assurance* about God's boundless love and mercy and tender forgiveness, I would genuinely find myself silently and gratefully thinking:

You are the most amazing community of people...what a privilege and an honor to be a part of your lives.

When our souls catch up...when we find rest...when a gentleness and humility of heart claims us anew, everything, everything looks different.

The writer of Ecclesiastes speaks of this. The Psalmist reminds us of this.

And Jesus assures us of this with his familiar words:

*Come to me, all you that are weary,
and are carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you,
and learn from me;
for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls...*

When our souls catch up...when we find rest, and a gentleness and humility of heart finds us anew, everything, everything looks different.

This has been my experience. Has it not been yours?

Kathy Wonson Eddy, a minister, and a writer, and a composer of sacred song, has collaborated with her husband, Robert Merrill Eddy, a photographer, on a book entitled, *Writing with Light*. In it, Wonson Eddy relays a moving account of her own grandmother's version of setting down bundles...refusing to move...so that her soul could catch up.

Wonson Eddy writes:

My grandmother used to say an empty chair beckoned her every afternoon to leave her tasks and come "invite her soul," letting the rest of the world take care of itself for a while. Her phrase "invite the soul" is just right; it speaks of the truth that in emptiness and silence we find abundance. In solitude there is actually deep companionship. The visitor we invite to sit with us is our very soul, a lively friend indeed, a wise teacher and imaginative child...

The passage of winter to spring happens in miniature within us whenever we sit in stillness in an empty chair and "invite our soul." At first we may become more aware of pain in the present, harsh and bitter realities we have been denying in our busy conscious life. However, as we sit, we come to know strength and hope. We become

more and more certain of summer and rebirth and warmth to come. The people we love, from whom we are absent as we enjoy this empty time, are enriched by our “soul’s visit” when we return to them.

She continues:

The word “empty” is from the Indo-European root *med*, which also gives us the English words “medicine,” “remedy,” and “meditation.” It is fascinating that in the very roots of our language, emptiness is connected not only with meditation (to think things over, to reflect), but also with agents of healing, with medicinal, curative power. The ancients knew a deep truth we need to relearn in our busy culture. Our own healing is found in the empty chair where we invite our soul and open ourselves to whatever the future brings. Our soul, *anima*, brings healing in her gentle hands from the Great Physician. Emptiness offers holy medicine to refresh and inspire.³

There is a collective sorrow in our world, felt by so many of us in the wake of the world’s brokenness. Wars continue to be waged afar. Violence and injustice fill our streets at home. There is a deep, collective longing felt by many of us to act in ways that will bring peace and justice and liberation and healing to all of the broken and warring and violated places in our world.

There is a pervasive pattern of frantic activity driving many of us, born sometimes of truly yearning to ease the pain, eradicate the suffering; born sometimes of staying so busy and distracted that we do not even notice the pain and suffering within us or around us, let alone feel it.

For as much as the wisdom of our faith tradition, for as much as the psalms and the gospel call us to prophetic action in the world, they also invite us to rest...to set down our bundles...to sit down and refuse to budge, so that our souls can catch up. If we do not heed their call, we might just end up feeling hopeless—even hatred—in the midst of our frantic activity.

A number of years ago, I heard Fred Craddock, a retired professor of New Testament and homiletics, tell a story that I’ve not forgotten. In it, we are introduced to Scott Mamaday, an American Indian, and a teacher of literature. In one of his own works, Mamaday tells of the time he used to visit his grandmother’s house, the woman closer to him than anyone else.

Because he was an Indian boy, he was insulted a lot in school and so he would always run to his grandmother’s house after school and there he would play in the afternoon...and he would always go into her house for jam and bread. She was a comfort to him, and he writes:

Her kitchen was an arsenal of jam...and bread...and her apron was my fortress...I would run after school to her house and she would hear me and she would fix my elbow or my knee or my finger that was hurt and she would dry my tears sometimes, but always jam and bread...

One afternoon, Mamaday went in yelling, “Grandma, Grandma!”

She wasn’t to be seen. “Grandma! Grandma! I want some jam and bread, Grandma!” She wasn’t to be seen.

³Robert Merrill Eddy and Kathy Wonson Eddy, *Writing with Light: Meditations for Caregivers in Word and Image* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1997), 76–77.

She had two rooms to her cottage. He left the kitchen where he'd always gone and started in to her little bedroom, and he says:

...I was startled at the doorway and stopped in my tracks...for there at the foot of the bed she was...the kerosene lamp casting her shadow against the wall as she bowed and prayed in her native Kiowa tongue...and her arms rising and lowering as was her custom in her praying...

As Craddock observes:

What a marvelous insight for the little boy...that there are times when you just don't say or do anything...

Would that we should have such marvelous insights for the living of our lives. Would that we should have such wisdom—not only the wisdom of the little boy, but the wisdom of his old grandma, for she paused on bended knee at the foot of her bed, inviting her soul to visit her...before she rose to serve jam and bread...that in the midst of all of her activity, she might receive what she needed to face the trials and the heartaches of her day.

What are the trials and heartaches that you carry this day?

Where are the broken places in your lives that need the quiet, healing balm of your soul's visit?

How might you still the frantic motion of your body, or the relentless activity of your mind...how might you open your heart to the hands of love, that they might comfort you and give you peace?

*Come to me, all you who are weary
and are carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you,
and learn from me;
for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls...*

When we heed this call of Jesus, then we might also know the truth of those words written in the preface to *The Soul of the World* by its editor, to whom I've already made reference:

The soul is the name of the unifying principle, power, or energy that is at the center of our being. To be in touch with soul means going back to the sacred source, the site of life-releasing energy, the activating force of life, the god-grounds...then...we can venture forth and confront the world in all its marvelous and terrifying forces, to make sacred our hours here: to learn to pay such supreme attention to the world that eternity blazes into time with our holy longing. Soul-making, this.⁴

May it be so.

Amen.

⁴Phil Cousineau, op. cit.