

Here are some thoughts about getting older. I don't always go the extra mile, but when I do it's because I missed my exit. \*\* As I'm watching this particular young generation try to rewrite history, one thing I'm sure of.....it will be misspelled and have no punctuation. \*\*I've decided I wanna be a teenager again and ruin my life differently. I have new ideas. \*\*And finally, I miss the 90's when bread was still good for you, and no one knew what kale was.....(internet source)

I'm jumping right in with the three points. The problem in this text is legalism; its solution can be found with healthy religion, and finally, what the gospel is really about -- transformation. First, legalism. Sadly, strangely, obedience to laws is one of the safest places to avoid God, to avoid conversion, to avoid the spontaneous movements of the Spirit. When I was in Chapel Hill, I worked with several people who were involved in plowshares activities – non-violent protests to some of the policies of our government. I didn't always agree with their methods, but I was humbled by their courage and convictions – and they were spot on with their deep understanding of the way of Christ. What was interesting to me was that the nastiest treatment they received was often from so-called 'good' Catholics – who had made an idol of U.S. civil law. We often have listened more carefully to the laws of our country than we have to the ways of Christ. This is what happens when our theological and spiritual formation remains at the level of grade school. Our country is filled with such Christians. Law is not adequate to name or support the full work of the Spirit, nor to even begin to live out a life of discipleship. Law often actually opposes the gospel. Think slavery – which was legal; segregation – which was legal; refusal to welcome the alien and immigrant, which is legal. Why else do we suppose Jesus warned us about persecution from church and state? Why was Jesus Himself killed by 'good' law-abiding people? From both church and state (help here from Rohr, GRACE IN ACTION, p. 12-23)

It is amazing how hung up some people can become over relatively minor issues. But for the legalist, of course, there are no minor issues. But, if that is so that there are no minor ones, it also means that there are no major ones either. If there are no major and minor issues, wearing long hair on men or short hair for women – become the equivalent of murder. The length of a skirt becomes comparable to adultery. Legalism continually strains at the gnat while swallowing the camel, to use a phrase of Jesus. Jesus undoubtedly appreciated many things about the Pharisees, but their sense of priorities was out of whack. (adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, July-Sept 2005, page not cited) It's like the man who was streaking, stark naked, running up and down the aisles of St. Patrick's Cathedral. The head usher, who saw himself as more of a bouncer than a minister of hospitality, knew that he had to act, and scolded the man: "Sir, we do not allow running in the aisles of St. Patrick's. Please walk." (EVERYDAY MYSTICISM, Anthony J. Ciorra, p. 120-121)

Second, we need to understand both the gift – and dark side of religion. Religion, at its best, helps us bring the foundational divine love into ever-increasing consciousness. In other words, it's more about waking up than about cleaning up. Early-stage religion tends to focus on cleaning up, which is to say, determining who meets the requirements for moral behavior and religious belief. But Jesus threw a wrench into this whole machinery by refusing to enforce or even bother with what He considered secondary issues like Sabbath requirements, ritual laws, purity codes, membership requirements, debt codes, on and on. He saw they were only 'human commandments,' which far too often took the place of love. (See Matthew 15:3, 6-9) Or, as He puts it in another place: "You hypocrites, you pay your tithes...and neglect the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and good faith" (Mt 23:23). Cleaning up is a result of waking up, but most of us put the cart before the horse.

It's no wonder His fellow Jews killed Jesus, just as many Catholics would love to eliminate Pope Francis today. Once we WAKE up, as Jesus and Pope Francis have, we know that cleaning up is a constant process that comes on different timetables for different people, around many different issues, and for very different motivations. This is why love and growth – authentic religion -- demand discernment, not enforcement. When it comes to actual soul work, attempts at policing and insisting on conformity are largely useless. Mere obedience is far too often a detour around actual love. Obedience is usually about cleaning up, love is about waking up. (Rohr, THE UNIVERSAL CHRIST, p. 72-73)

Third, the issue is transformation – change of heart. The core of Jesus' mission and message is transformation. So why are so few church-goers transformed? Why are so many stuck in immature and unhealthy religion? There is a deep, unencountered woundedness, perhaps passed on for generations, that blocks our inner growth. Deep unhealed fear, anger, grieving, loneliness, brought about by the assaults, lovelessness, and manipulation of much of the life around us have made us resistant to trust, openness, and love. Often it is difficult to discern even that we ARE wounded and blocked by unhealed pain. We have become so used to deep pain and defensive/offensive reactions that they have become part of the air we breathe. We can learn to listen to our pain by paying attention to our negative side: our tendency to worry, hair-trigger anger, compulsive over-control, inertia and procrastination, judgmentalism, legalism, manipulating or closing off others, constant broken relationships.

Too often we have been told to denounce our faults, confess them, and then use our willpower to become holy. It rarely works. Why? Because we need to listen attentively to our hearts – which allows us to recognize our faults – which is not the same as condoning or giving in to them – because they can teach us as much about our pain and needs as our longings can teach us about the gifts that lie beneath them.

For example, if we have a tendency always to be worried and anxious, and that does not seem to change, no matter how much we pray about it, no matter how many good resolutions we make, we can dialogue with our worry, asking ourselves: "What am I afraid of?" We should ask this question with a gentle respect, a genuine desire to know, not with contempt or scorn. And then we can ask again, and keep asking, each time at a deeper level. Perhaps we will discover that for some reason, all our lives, we have felt like a target. We have always felt that accidents, traumas, illnesses, nasty surprises are sneaking up on us from behind or will suddenly leap out to confront us. Did some such traumas actually occur to us or to people close to us? Do we feel powerless, helpless much of the time? Is this chronic worry a signal given to us by our deep self that there is a child within us who feels helpless and frightened? A child whose time for healing has come?

Such a condition is not healed by mere confession of sins. Such a condition cannot be overcome by resolutions and willpower. It needs prayer. Quiet, open-to-God prayer. A good therapist can be very helpful as well. There is a child within who needs healing. We begin to understand something of the compassion God has for us. We begin to share with others what we really feel. We begin to release these inner hurt and frightened children into God's hands for healing.

Why is this central pain, which has for so long blocked our growth, not automatically, spontaneously healed by God's love without our awareness and asking? Much of it is, of course. In many ways we are healed at subconscious levels without consciously knowing it. But apparently there are some forms of inner pain whose healing needs our intentional consent. God's LOVE always surrounds us, our unreconciled areas as well as our light-filled areas. But God's full HEALING seems to wait for our longing and consent. This is because we are not helpless puppets, but created to be children, heirs, spouses, partners, co-creators with God. Our free consent is a crucial part of the creative wisdom of growing. If I scold you on Sundays and try to make you feel

guilty – it's not going to help you. It never helps me! We are invited to change, we are allured by love, never by law.

This deep, inner transformation comes from love. Love of God for us, love of others for us, and love for ourselves. And only prayer can give us this. Law cannot even begin. We are made in the image and likeness of God. This is a beautiful and deeply profound image. And we ARE beautiful. Right this very minute! Even with all of our sins, failings, and shortcomings. We need to know that we are loved, understand that, believe it to our toes. We should never, never NEVER! compare our looks, money, body, talent, or anything else to another. It gains us nothing; it makes us feel inadequate – because we always compare to those we judge to have MORE, we never compare to those we judge to have less. We are made exactly as God intended. Completely beautiful in His image. It's enough! It's perfect! It means we are already LIKE GOD. And once we know that, and are open to that, we are transformed into what we truly, deeply are. AMEN. (help from Flora Slosson Wuellner, WEAVINGS, May-June 2009, page numbers not cited)