

February 1, 2018

I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation.

Nothing to hold on to is the root of happiness

Living with Tension

I read an article the other day by Dennis Coday in the NCR, which related to the Responsorial Psalm today, "*I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation.*" It was titled "*Let's all agree to live in tension.*" Dennis writes: "*My words in this article seemed to have sparked more than the usual interest among our readers, if my inbox is any indication. Some emails were positive, others were not. Clearly 'agreeing to live in tension' is not always a welcomed suggestion in a culture that holds comfort and security as the supreme value.*"

We know that "*holding comfort and security as the supreme value*" is counter to ancient wisdom. One Zen master said: "*No seed ever sees the flower. Seeds are the beginnings of a new future, planted in hard ground and slow growing, knowing that their harvest time will come sometime in the future.*" Boethius, a fifth-century Roman philosopher, taught the world of his time something important for ours, "*Every age that is dying is another age coming to life.*" New life is not death unless we reject it.

Pema Chodron

Contemporary American Buddhist teacher, Pema Chodron, describes living in tension as living in an "In-Between State." I would like to share some of what she writes with you, not as something to analyze, but as something to ponder and contemplate as to how it relates to the state of your inner-being and mine. What she says is something we may not be used to hearing, but we should be. It is rooted in Eastern mysticism, and Jesus was an Easterner.

This is what Pema says about 'living in tension': "Nothing to hold on to is the root of happiness. There's a sense of freedom when we accept that we're not in control. It takes some training to equate complete letting go with comfort. "This may lead to a 'don't-know-what-to-do' kind of feeling, a sense of being caught in-between. On the one hand, we're completely fed up with seeking comfort from what we eat, drink, couple up with. We're fed up with beliefs, ideas, and ideologies of all kinds. But yet we wish it were true that outer comfort could bring lasting happiness.

"When we find ourselves in a place of discomfort and fear, when we're in a dispute, we'll want to blame, to take sides, to stand our ground. We feel we must have some resolution. In these cases, 'right' is as extreme a view as 'wrong'. They both block our innate wisdom. Standing at a crossroads not knowing which way to go is an important place, for it is there that our solid views begin to dissolve.

"We are told about the pain of chasing after pleasure and the futility of running from pain. We also hear about the joy of realizing our interconnectedness, of trusting the openness of our hearts and minds. But we aren't told all that much about the state of being in-between, no longer able to get our old comfort from the outside, but not yet dwelling in a continual sense of equanimity and warmth.

"Anxiety, heartbreak, and tenderness mark the 'in-between' state. It's the kind of place we usually want to avoid. The challenge is to stay there rather than buy into struggle and complaint. The challenge is to let it soften us rather than make us more rigid and afraid. Becoming intimate with the queasy feeling of being in the middle of nowhere only makes our hearts more tender. When we are brave enough to stay in the middle, compassion arises spontaneously. By not knowing and not acting like we know what's happening, we begin to access our inner strength.

"Dwelling in the in-between state requires learning to contain the paradox of something being both right and wrong, of someone being strong and loving and also angry, uptight, and stingy. When someone pushes our buttons, do we set out to make the person wrong? Or do we repress our reactions? We can pray, seek an open mind, or simply look at the open sky - anything that encourages us to stay on the brink and not solidify into a view.

"Holding the tension of paradox is not something we can naturally do. We need to spend our whole lifetime learning to live with uncertainty, ambiguity, and insecurity. To stay in the middle prepares us to meet the unknown without fear; it prepares us to face both our life and our death. It doesn't really matter if we feel depressed or inspired by being in the in-between state. That's why compassion and courage are absolutely vital, they give us the resources to be genuine about where we are, that we are always in transition." (Close quote)

Learning how to live with tension is not a new concept. Isn't this what parents experience in raising their families? Isn't this what we experience in living with the diverse beliefs and practices in our church and in our country? Learning how to live with tension is the fertile ground for dwelling in Hope, and living in Hope is where we want to be. The in-between is a holy place. We can only imagine what our country and world would look like if we indeed lived from that place.

Ancient Wisdom says, "Nothing to hold on to is the root of happiness."

The word for this wisdom is "Gospel," and its prayer is:

**We turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble,
and you fill us with the joy of salvation.**