

Turning Aside. Wondering.

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
September 3, 2023
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Parker J. Palmer is well known to faith communities for his work as founder of The Centre for Courage and Renewal. For many years the Centre has offered tools to nurture authentic, courageous, community, by helping the individuals in those communities to discover their authentic self and voice.

At the heart of Palmer's process are "Circles of Trust", small circles of people who follow a number of touchstones¹. One Touchstone states:

When the going gets rough, turn to wonder. Turn from reaction and judgment to wonder and compassionate inquiry.

The Community of Faith that I served in the past struggled deeply to become more hospitable to all people, particularly how to radically welcome those of the 2SLGBTQ+ community² I think we all want to be part of a radically welcoming, loving, equitable community, but sometimes we fall into patterns of thinking, speaking, even acting that undermine community.

So, in my previous church, we created a Circle of Trust made up of people who brought vastly different theologies and beliefs to the conversation. We followed the Touchstones each time we met. I have to tell you, it was a challenge, following those touchstones. I'm not sure what we accomplished, except learning to honour that principal of turning to wonder when we our urge is to react, or falling back on old patterns of talking and not listening. I think that we all grew, turning aside from the routine, the programmed patterns.

I love these Biblical Stories, the Jewish Scriptures and Christian, from ancient times offering us fresh ways to encounter the Holy. Moses did something quite extraordinary here. On a typical day watching his flock, he notices the fire. He could have thought little of it, after all, his attention needed to be on his animals who depended on him.

He could have walked on. Stuck to his routine. But he not only noticed this anomaly in his routine, but he went over to investigate. What about his flock in this moment of wonder?

¹ These touchstones can be found at: <https://couragerenewal.org/library/courage-renewal-touchstones/> In Summary, they are: Give and receive welcome; Be present as fully as possible; What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand; Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth; Speak from your center to the center of the circle, using "I" statements, trusting people to do their own sifting and winnowing; No fixing, saving, advising or correcting each other; Learn to respond to others with honest, open questions When the going gets rough, turn to wonder; Attend to your own inner teacher; Trust and learn from the silence; Observe deep confidentiality; and Know that it's possible to leave the circle with whatever it was that you needed when you arrived, and that the seeds planted here can keep growing in the days ahead

² This acronym stands for Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning and additional sexual orientations and gender identities.

One Bible Scholar notes that today's story of Moses and the burning bush that is not consumed tells us that Moses sees this strange occurrence. *Seeing*, truly noticing things, is not a well-developed skill in our world today, the scholar rightly observes about our culture.

The original Hebrew text says something interesting.

"When the LORD saw that Moses turned aside to see, God called to him from the bush."

...Just how long had that bush been burning? How many other people before Moses had passed by and not noticed the bush? How many others had seen but had not turned aside? (the Scholar wonders)³

How caught up do you and I get caught up in the things we do, in our work, our family life, or simply going through a typical day? How often do we notice the holy as we journey through a typical week? Really notice, and turn aside from what we are doing to pay attention to what I'm guessing are countless anomalies that many people miss?

Even more challenging is the question of whether or not, in those moments of conflict that trigger our programmed response: Are we able to turn aside from our usual script, our opinions, our hard lines, can we turn to wonder this week?

When we are ready to react, can we turn to wonder? To see these as holy ground moments of discovery, rather than an opportunity to win a debate; a moment allowing us to nurture patience, rather than reactivity; a holy ground moment of discovering that this conflict may be more about us, and our fear, than about the other person with whom we are in conflict.

It is a challenging world to practice seeing, and turning aside from, our programmed responses. Moses of the Hebrew Bible laid the groundwork for the one that we gather on this holy ground to follow, Jesus. Jesus led his followers daily into encounters that triggered their programmed reactions and judgments. He helped them to take off their sandals regularly to notice the holiness in their midst, to turn aside from the usual patterns of thinking and acting – responding with patience and love.

Christ continues to guide us, as we do the same in modern time. May we see, turn aside, and turn to wonder, regularly in our lives. Amen.

³ "Listening Anew to God's Calling". Dear Working Preacher, Kathryn M. Schifferdecker (August 27, 2023). workingpreacher.org