

What makes you come alive? This makes me come alive... swinging a bat! Come Sunday afternoons in June and July, your pastor will be playing softball, and every time I step up to the plate or a batter smacks a ball, I come alive. I have been playing softball since I was in the third grade... so, just a few years now!

A beautiful sunrise like the one this morning that colored the sky laced with clouds makes me come alive as well! God's natural world, from a butterfly dancing among flowers, to a majestic mountain vista, enlivens my being. As you come to know me, you will realize that dogs – the wag of their tails and their unconditional welcome - make me come alive. Young, inquisitive, and energetic children, enliven me as their energy sparks life within me. I come alive when people dare to share their heart felt needs for prayer, or share with me how they see God's Spirit at work in their lives. I come alive when I am engaged in hands-on ministry whether it is visiting someone or serving in a soup kitchen. This preaching moment always makes me come alive, too.

What about you? What makes you come alive?

"Don't ask yourself what the world needs, ask yourself what makes you come alive, and do that! Because what the world needs is people who have come alive!" wrote Dr. Howard Thurman. This twentieth century, influential, African-American pastor, whose theology of radical nonviolence shaped a generation of civil rights activists, including Martin Luther King, Jr., was profoundly influenced by his maternal grandmother, Nancy Ambrose. His grandmother and mother were both members of Mount Bethel Baptist Church in Waycross, Florida. They were both women of deep Christian faith who helped Thurman come alive. These women remind me of Grandmother Eunice and mother Lois, who kindled the aliveness of faith in Timothy, as recorded in Paul's second letter to Timothy. Mary, the mother of Jesus, nurtured Jesus as he came alive in faith.

Who are the women of deep faith that kindled the aliveness of your faith?

My own mom and dad raised me in the faith, yet women beyond my family of origin also come to mind when I think of women who have nurtured my aliveness in faith. A woman named Ann Seufert is one of my spiritual grandmothers. She was present at my installation service in March at the young age of 91. Ann was a tangible presence of God's compassionate love. For me faith grew, for I witnessed her passion for coming along side those overlooked, forgotten or ignored by powers and principalities of church and state. Ann was God's tangible presence of love and support for women seeking to respond to God's call to ministry in their lives. Ann never settled for what is, she always saw the possibility of what God intended. Other women who were a tangible presence of God's love in my life come to mind and heart as well, Janet, Sue, Mary Lee, Beth, Sharon, and so many more, as I remember my own journey of faith.

What about you? How have women nurtured the aliveness of your faith?

[pause]

I know what derails my aliveness – busyness, worry, what ifs, and anxiety about the future to name just a few. I can only imagine that what ifs, as well as a bit of anxiety had crept into the psyches of the disciples, for Jesus had done the unexpected as they gathered at table for Passover, as he washed their feet as if he were a servant. He also foretold of his imminent betrayal and of Peter's denial. The disciples must have sensed that their time with Jesus was drawing to a close.

So, it shouldn't surprise us that Jesus tried to reassure his disciples that night after washing their feet, saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Yet, as the story goes, trouble was brewing. I wonder if Thurman's grandmother or mother ever spoke these words to Thurman as he faced troubles or uncertainties. "Thurman, do not let your heart be troubled, stand firm, believe in God."

Jesus said to his disciples with all tenderness, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." Now, when we hear the word "believe" in the context of our faith, we probably associate this word with a particular belief, a dogma or doctrine. Do you believe in the virgin birth? Do you believe in the resurrection? Do you believe substitutionary atonement? Do you believe... you fill the blank. Yet, in the Gospel of John, believing is not an ascent to some set of specific dogmas and doctrines. The word "believe" is more alive than that. Believing is about a relationship, an active commitment to a person – to Jesus, to God. Believing is also about engaging one's aliveness in the works of faith.

Notice though that what Jesus is trying to convey about believing to his disciples is hard for them to comprehend. Jesus says, "You know the way..." But Thomas quickly responds saying, "We don't know the way." Thomas seems lost or at minimum confused with what Jesus is trying say. This is when Jesus responds with one of his "I am" statements.

"Thomas," Jesus says, "I am the way." You don't need google maps. You don't need the Waze app on your phone or a navigation system in your car. All you need is me, Thomas. All you need is a relationship with me. With compassion Jesus said to Thomas, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

Do you remember how this gospel begins? "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...All things came into being through the Word...what has come into being through the Word is life." The purpose of the Word made flesh from birth to death, from resurrection to ascension is to bring life, not just eternal life, but aliveness in us here and now. This third phrase of Jesus' I am statement, "I am the life," gives us a clue to one of the questions I posed earlier, "What makes you come alive?" Jesus' answer to us, "I do." You in me and me in you, is what will make you be most fully alive!

But what about that middle phrase, "and the truth..." This second phrase is often punctuated by the phrase that follows, "No one comes to the Father except through me." Yet, when interpreting Scripture, we must remember the context. Jesus is speaking to his inner circle of disciples, reassuring them that what is to come, can be overcome by their relationship with Jesus that will transcend death. Death will not end their relationship, even though the days ahead will appear very dark to the disciples.

Jesus is saying to the disciples through this "I am" statement, "I eclipse all other ways to God, that you have previously known, even that of the prophets, like Moses or Abraham," writes commentator Donald Senior. He continues saying, "Assuming that [the phrase] "I am the truth" is a definitive comment on whether or not there is any validity to other ways to God beyond Christianity, is taking the text out of context." Context in biblical interpretation is important.

Jesus is the truth for the disciples in their hour of uncertainty; for Jesus is the true revealer of God, the God who desires a deep and abiding relationship that transcends any and all circumstances, even death. If you want to know what God is like... then look

to me, Jesus said to his disciples. My healing touch reveals God's true compassion. My challenge to the principalities and power of church and state reveals God's true justice. My willingness to lay down my life reveals God's true reconciling love. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," that will make you come alive!

Yet, when do we hear this passage from the 14th chapter of John's Gospel most frequently? Just like the 23rd Psalm we read last week, we hear this passage most often at memorial services, as we remember loved ones who have died. We hear the reassurance that Jesus goes before us to prepare a place for us and will come again and take us to our eternal home. We hear the reassurance that physical death is not the end of our stories, trusting that our loved ones are safely in the hands of our Savior.

Yet, this passage, like Psalm 23, is not for the dead, it is for the living! The disciples receive this assurance from Jesus, so that they will come alive, even in the face of what is to come! We receive this assurance this morning, so that in the face of whatever befalls us, we will be reminded of the tangible presence, the relational reality of Christ Jesus that transcends death.

Listen to the psalmist who claimed the tangible presence of a divine relationship, "In you I seek refuge; incline your ear to me; lead me; guide me; hour by hour I place my days in your hand; warm me with a smile; claim me with your steadfast love." The psalmist trusted God to be a refuge from the storms of life and a rock upon which life could be built.

It seems to me that the psalmist would understand Jesus' claim, as "the way, and the truth, and the life," for life lived most fully alive is lived in relationship with the divine. We come alive in relationship with the divine.

This became clear to me way back in junior high through a friend of mine. Her name was Janet. I can see her to this day talking about the tangible presence of Jesus in her life. She had a relational faith that made her come alive in ways that I did not yet understand. I remember being so struck by the aliveness of her faith that I marched into the office of the church I attended and asked for an appointment with the pastor. Bless, my pastor, Rev. Art Schultz, for he set up an appointment with me and we had a wonderful conversation about the relational nature of our Christian faith. God was able to be tangibly present in ways I had not yet understood. Just like the psalmist, I began to understand the tangible presence of God, God's willingness to be in relationship with us. My heart began to open that day in a new way to Christ as the way, and the truth, and the life. Janet's aliveness in Christ led to me to explore my faith more deeply. Janet's aliveness, by the power of the Spirit at work in her, helped me come alive in new and profound ways.

The way... the way is Christ. Christ's tangible presence which transcends death offers us life that is really life, aliveness within us and through us that "will do even greater works than these."

Yet, will we do greater works than these? Or will we settle for less?

I don't leave you with answers this week, I leave you with questions. One for you personally, "What makes you come alive?" Get in touch with what creates energy within you; energy that you willingly share with others as you follow the way of Christ. Second, reflect on what makes us, as a community of faith, come alive. What creates energy within this church that is then shared beyond us?

When we come alive... when the tangible presence of Christ comes alive within us, we will be able to do greater things than these! May this be so in our lives! Amen.