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Even in the Gap
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Readings:

FIRST READING: ACTS 4:5-12

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is "the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone." There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.'

SECOND READING: 1 JOHN 3:16-24

We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before God whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and God knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from God whatever we ask, because we obey God's commandments and do what pleases God.

And this is God's commandment, that we should believe in the name of God's Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as Jesus has commanded us. All who obey God's commandments abide in God, and God abides in them. And by this we know that God abides in us, by the Spirit that God has given us.

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Mind the Gap.

Ever hear that? Getting off the subway?

“Watch the space between the platform and the subway...”

or you might find yourself stepping into the gap.

It’s interesting that the gap is between two processes:

one waiting for something to arrive to “get somewhere”

and the other

“getting” to your somewhere. In between there are these gaps.

Such a warning want us to be careful not to inadvertently “Step into the gap” on our way to or fro wherever it is.

Surely good direction for subway travelers – but perhaps not such good direction for those working to follow and share the “Good News.”

It seems the gap may just be a uniquely integral part of our Christian faith and discipleship.

In fact I came up with an acronym for

God and Practice. GAP.

How do we see and know God and how do we practice God in what we see and do?

Being Christian or committed to other spiritual traditions calls us to be faithful, loving, compassionate, caring

Or whatever the words are that describe the *good-ness* of the *Good News* in our lives. And from all we know, such a stage of being in our lives: *hesed* – steadfast love, requires that we see, come to know, and take action by entering the gap between those who are privileged, comfortable, safe, accepted – and those who are treated as underclass, unsettled, live in danger, or dismissed.

It can call us into other gaps in the world, as well – such as those of planet and earth care; animal and species protection; and more. In other words, our faith is a faith that is best

know for its work *in the gap*. And, it is work that is a way of living – not a destination or a path to a culmination.

For, the *gap*, to paraphrase Jesus, “will always be with us...”

That, my sisters and brothers is why we are here, I think. More. I believe.

To work and live in the *gap*, the horizontal *intersection* of the cross with the vertical call to discipleship, here.

The *gap*, then becomes the place of the cross, the place of remembrance, the place where all eternity intersects – with us: all of us.

To live outside of the *gap* is to be an *observer* in this mystery of life and service and Spirit on this planet. It is to live in a place of judgment, criticism, cynicism, and selfish containment. And to live there in that place is to wither not to grow.

To live outside of the *gap* is to make us defensive and protective; fearful of others and what they might do to us. It is to be mistrustful and misguided. It is a place of nihilism, the absence of hope – dressed up in the disguise of prosperity or denial.

It is a place where materialism is as much a sickness of denial as is alcoholism or drug abuse.

In other words, the movement toward healing burns in us all, but only builds into a flame when we all take the risk and the personal responsibility of entering into the *gap* together. That means those with and those without; those willing to help and those willing to ask for help; those lost and willing to be found – by each other.

The point is that if we, and I am speaking to those of us gathered here, want to make a difference then we need to reside and live within the *gap* of the absence of things that we say, believe, or feel are important to us as people who are faithful. And then we invite others into the *gap* from the absence in their lives they wish to fill.

These are the dual gifts we bring to one another of help and need. They are equal in the light and shadows of the cross. And the work of the cross is to witness and encourage; to bring the Good News – and it flows in mysterious ways from any of us who enter the *gap* with one another.

Let’s be up front, transparent, and honest always.

There are those on either side of or who surround the *gap*, because maybe that is the better way to describe the *gap*, as something that we circle – who are unwilling to experience the discomfort of getting close to others, the tension that can bring, which is why we always need the leaders to show the way. To break the tension.

What do we so fear about tension?

That it will always escalate? Because we are afraid things are going to get out of hand.

Friends, things are already out of hand.

In fact, the gap is the only place where things get resolved. The gap is exactly what Jesus entered into in his ministry – right into the tension. It is where his teaching emerged and where his ministry thrived, even unto and beyond his executions – and I don't believe it was ever “comfortable.

But something happens in the gap. It has its own parameters. The healing and work that takes place there somehow makes up for what needs to be let go to get there.

Mostly fear...

It was into the gap that the disciples entered as we read Acts.

We began this morning's reading of Acts 4:5, but to understand what is happening, we need to go back to the beginning of Chapter 3:

[paraphrase]

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

That sets up the building of the crowds and the attention that Peter and John were getting. Before this morning's reading, Acts 4 begins:

[paraphrase]

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening,

they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

And then we pick up today and the disciples are brought from jail (another place in the gap) and they are asked by whose authority they did these things. And these disciples did not hold back.

[paraphrase]

‘Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is “the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.” There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.’

This kind of audacity was not tolerated well. This standing squarely in the center of the gap, between those who ruled for power and order and those who were subjugated to the power and order and kept at a distance – here were these disciples in the gap, speaking their truth.

They did not fear the truth. Something that is at the center of the gaps into which we enter. For you see, gaps are always places of truth – discovered or otherwise.

It would be easy to assume that the disciples were standing with the people and the oppressed. Yet, the whole scene is created to show them neither siding with the oppressed or with those in power; neither being influenced by the demands of the poor or the demands of the wealthy.

They were witnesses, giving what they had to others, accepting what others had to bring. It’s how the masses were and are to be fed – both figuratively and literally.

You get the sense that not only were the disciples challenging the rulers, they were challenging the broader group, as well – because it is easy to believe that some of those watching from the sidelines on both sides were also in another crowd, the one caught up in the frenzy: “Crucify him. Crucify him.”

Perhaps on this day they listened.

After all, have not even we who have helped others found reason to criticize those we have helped; have not even those we sought to help found reason to criticize us?

The lines and curves around the gap are windy, indeed.

The chapter ends, as follows:

[paraphrase]

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. “What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.”

Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

The “Gap” is clearly not as visible as this may all sound. It is subtle and all around us, if we watch we will see it.

When you here it the next time on the subway, perhaps you will remember some of this.

And maybe you will be reminded and amazed as I am at how often “the gap” is the simplest of acts,

“May I help you?” comes to mind – instead of silence and not interrupting our day or business.

There are many subtle ways to close the gap between living our lives “in remembrance of Jesus and what he taught us.” But John reminds us that there are clearly examples in the life of Jesus, examples or ideals that most of us will keep our sights on, work toward, but never achieve.

“he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

“how does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

“Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

And this is his commandment, 1 John tells us:
that we should believe in his name and love one another, just as he commanded us.

He might just as well said,

“Step into the gap, do what you can, love one another, and do this in remembrance of me – for I am always with you. Even in the gap.

And, the Great Conductor might also have said:

Oh, and don't worry about leaving your personal belongings behind. You are all you need when you walk with me.

All aboard!