

Easter Sunday there were long streams of cars coming on Camino del Sol from both directions, all turning into our church parking lot. One woman was driving very apprehensively, looking around a great deal as she was driving, and almost immediately her car was positioned, so all she could do was pull into the open space right in front of her. Lickety split, the Owl Express Golf Cart was there to drive her door to door, where she was warmly greeted, given flowers to insert in the cross, in our first Sunday morning celebration of Communion in two years! As she came out of worship, the woman described that she usually went to the E Free or Lutheran Churches, but missing their driveways she had tried to turn around here and became caught in the traffic flow! At which point everyone was so excited to welcome and assist her, she had put her car in park and stayed where she was. After worship she said, "I've been going to the other churches for years, but I thoroughly enjoyed worship with you!"

Have you ever felt like that, like you have routinely been guided to the same destinations, parking where convenient but not necessarily where you wanted to be? The other day, I was going from the hospital to a doctor's office, so typed Carondolet into my GPS; but the GPS began guiding me to this same address in Nogales so I PULLED OVER to re-enter the information. In 40 years of marriage, we have tried weekly to have a date night, the one problem is when neither of us care where we are going to go. Maybe you've gotten parked in a stuck family relationship, or circumstance, or parked in ideas that never went where you wanted to go? Truth be told a lot of us have PARKED our minds, when we should have kept searching, or been distracted when we should have stopped.

I have learned our most recent class of Stephen Ministers created a phrase for us. When ideas start coming too fast, when we need to re-evaluate what we believe, and what we want to do, someone would shout "PULL OVER". This did not mean we wanted to park here permanently, so much as we want a safe place to stop momentarily and reconnoiter.

Most of us have parked our understanding of Jesus' Disciple Thomas, back in Sunday School, where we called him DOUBTING THOMAS and quickly learned about being a "doubting Thomas". But the older I have become, the more I have studied, the more I question if we have been misdirected to a wrong PARKING place. What is the purpose of this circumstance in John's Gospel? Instead of staying parked on the premises of where we have been, we need to PULL OVER and discuss other possibilities.

SO PULL OVER: Thomas has received a wrong title. According to John's Gospel, Thomas is the disciple who encouraged the disciples to go with Jesus when they learned their friend Lazarus had died, even though it might mean their arrests and death.

Thomas is also the disciple at the last supper, when Jesus metaphorically is describing that "I must go ahead to a place you cannot come but will meet me later," Thomas says "If we do not know where you are going how can we know the way?"

Thomas is not so much a doubter, as a Pragmatic Realist. Jesus had knelt before them and washed their feet, they had had a meal together last Thursday night, then they saw him publicly shamed, convicted and publicly executed, not in an instantaneous: one minute you are here the next you are gone, but a long protracted death by inches, until there is no longer hope. The Bible does not tell us why Thomas was not in the Upper Room the first time, but does say that the other Disciples were locked there because of fear, so possibly Thomas was attempting to put their losses behind him rather than believing in resurrection and seeking to redeem and reconcile all that had happened.

Related to this, I am convinced that Realistic Doubts are the preface to Deeper Faith and Commitment. There is nothing wrong with doubt. Doubt is NOT the absence of faith, but the opportunity to question. If anything God's granting humanity the gift of FREE WILL, represented a doubt by God of whether Humanity

would respond to God and one another in love, or whether we would reject everything except ourselves. While I would not wish STRUGGLE on anyone, I hope there have been opportunities when you have questioned what you truly believe and why? What does it mean to believe in God? What does it mean that Jesus wept for Lazarus, when he had the power to bring Lazarus back from the dead? What does it mean to believe in a god who suffered and died for us? What does it mean to believe that not even death and fear and doubts (which isolate and immobilize us) that nothing can separate us from the love of God? What does it mean to be committed to a marriage, no matter what?

QUESTIONING REALISTIC DOUBTS are what allow us to live into real commitment with a real faith.

PULL OVER: The Biblical story of Thomas in the Upper Room is only contained in the Gospel of John... What was John trying to say, different from the other Gospels' Resurrection accounts, by telling this story? The disciples were locked away in the Upper Room, WHY? Because of their fears. The Gospel of John was written roughly 70 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, during the era of Roman Persecution, throwing Christians to the Lions and such. A culture, where to be found believing in Jesus Christ was punishable by death. In North America, we have legitimate fears, but we have lived lives of relative safety. There have been wars, we endured 9/11, we have now survived the fears and realities of this Plague of the last two years, but as a Nation our ancestors came to this new Continent to evade Religious Persecution. Thankfully while at times divided by our faiths, we have never gone to war with one another over being Christian.

Jesus came to them... meaning that Their fears, being hidden away, being behind locked doors, none of this could prevent Jesus from doing whatever was necessary to reach them.

Jesus Breathed on them saying "Receive the Holy Spirit." But do we not have God's gift of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, why is this here? The Book of Acts, which reports the events of The Day of Pentecost, seems to have been written by the same author as the Book of Luke. Luke has emphasis on the Birth of Jesus with Shepherds and Angels, which are not included in the other Gospels. When did God give the Church the Holy Spirit? John's Gospel began in a different time and place, with a remembrance of Genesis, that in the Beginning the Spirit of God BROODED over the face of the waters of chaos. John is Implying that the same LOGOS, the same CREATIVE FORCE physically present in the Waste and Void at Creation, WAS AGAIN present following the sacrificial death of Jesus, GOD CREATING ANEW.

So do you believe as Luke did, that these are three completely separate identities of God, and that we need to anticipate the coming of the Holy Spirit ONLY after Jesus' Ascension which was 40 Days after Easter, so the Holy Spirit came on the 50th Day = Pentecost?

OR do you believe as John describes here, that we experience the Holy Spirit through the presence of Jesus? While a fairly theoretical question, there are many in our culture who so believe in Monotheism (One God) that with the coming of Jesus, they believe the God of CREATION, stopped CREATING. That there was one God in the Old Testament, a different identity of Jesus as Savior, a third as the WIND that empowers the Disciples to act? How do we understand what Christianity has maintained, that: God is One in Three Persons?

PULL OVER: What does it mean, that when Jesus appears to the Disciples yet another time in the Upper Room, and WHY, because this too is recorded no where else? If the Disciples were still in that Locked Upper Room after Jesus came the first time, then they had not been changed by the first experience. This is like the man who asked by Jesus "Do you believe?" responds "I Believe but help my Unbelief."

Again Jesus breathes upon them, saying receive the Holy Spirit, but this time with Thomas present, Jesus shows them the wounds of his sacrifice. Being RESURRECTED overcame death but did not heal his wounds.

The scars we bear are important to us, those scars are places of woundedness, of humanity and suffering. According to all four Gospels Jesus touched the suffering of several different people, some with leprosy; some with bleeding; some who were lame that he healed to dance; some who were blind; and some who were deaf. A curiosity that I adore, is that in Sign Language, the language of the Deaf, the symbol for Jesus is not to spell out his name, the symbol of the deaf for Jesus is to touch the wounds in each hand!

Any time life comes at us too fast, when we have assumed conclusions that do not get us where we want to be, we need to PULL OVER and talk together.