

Homily – The Easter Cycle

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Earlier this year I started wearing my Apple Watch to bed. I wear the watch so that I can track my sleep or more specifically my sleep cycle. I use my Apple Watch to measure my sleep so that I know if there are things I need to improve with my sleep. And there are. I thought I was getting more sleep than I actually do. Thus, now I know that I need to go to bed thirty to sixty minutes earlier to get a better amount of sleep. The Apple Watch also measures the stages of sleep. Some of you do this with a Fitbit and some of you have actually completed a professional sleep study. The Apple Watch does a reasonable good replication of a sleep study. The Watch breaks down my sleep into four stages or categories – Core Sleep, which is the majority of the time in bed, Deep Sleep, which is when the body and brain actually heal themselves, REM Sleep, which is when dreams help us process, mend, and sort through the activities of our previous day, and awake time which isn't really sleep at all. All of us cycle through these four stages of sleep and my Apple Watch tells me that I need to get a bit more Deep Sleep. My sleep cycle could be improved so that I have more body and brain healing. I just need to figure what to do about it.

Now, I shared all of this about sleep because it is a good, simple example of a healing cycle or pattern. And, God has created us with several different healing cycles. Some cycles take a lifetime and some like sleep happen every night. Some cycles are a continuous advancement, while others are a dance of two steps forward and one step back. And some cycles have a constant repeat of highs and low, up and down, over and over again. The three healing cycles I want to look at today, are (1) the wisdom cycle, (2) the cycle of spiritual development, and (3) the cycle of violence.

The first cycle is the wisdom cycle, as it is taught by Episcopal Priest Cynthia Bourgeault. This is a pattern I have preached on before, and it is the cycle of order, disorder, reorder. On Easter Sunday we would call this life, death, and resurrection. The first stage in this cycle is order. We are plugging along in life. We have our routines, and as far as we know things are just fine. But then disorder happens.

There will always be at least one situation in our lives that we cannot fix, control, explain, change or even understand. Normally a job, a fortune, or a reputation has to be lost, a house has to be flooded, an illness has to be endured. The wisdom pattern requires that some kind of fall be programmed into the journey. And, it is normal that we still want to go backwards to some kind of previous order and reason, but part of the lesson of this time of disorder is that we are not in charge. Rather than forcefully moving ourselves back into the old ordered way of being, we must be open to the disorder. Be warned, however, that the ego and false-self will try to regain

control. But unexpected weaknesses, failure, and humiliation force us to go where we would never go otherwise. We must stumble and be brought to our knees by reality. We must actually be out of the driver's seat for a while, or we will never learn how to give up control to the Real Guide. The Wisdom Cycle is the necessary pattern of movement from order to disorder. But then it can move to reorder.

And unfortunately, the wisdom pattern never moves directly from order to reorder. There is no nonstop flight that does not go through the connecting hub of disorder. For meaningful spiritual growth this journey from order to disorder must first happen. Our role is to listen in our own lives, and to allow, and at least slightly to cooperate with this almost natural progression. And, we come to wisdom at the major price of both our innocence and our control. Few of us go there willingly. Normally, it must be thrust upon us. However, with our annual celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, Easter reminds us that death is not the end. Disorder does not have the final word. Winter turns into Spring. I'm not sure why God created the universe this way, but I have to trust the cycle that is shown to us by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Now, every religion in its own way talks about getting us to the reorder stage. Various systems would call it enlightenment, paradise, heaven, wisdom, salvation, springtime, or for the followers of Jesus, resurrection. It is the life on the other side of death, the victory on the other side of failure, the joy on the other side of birthing pains. It is an insistence on going through—not under, over, or around. Again, there is no nonstop flight to reorder. And, from your own life experience you may recognize that this pattern of order, disorder, and reorder has happened several times in your life. It does not happen once, for we all have many cycles of life, death, and resurrection. We all travel the wisdom cycle, though regrettably some get stuck.

The second cycle I want to talk about this morning is the cycle of spiritual development. Over the years spiritual teachers have developed a variety of ways to describe the stages of spiritual development. Some have two stages while others have a model with as many as nine stages. Today, I am going to focus on one model of a cycle of spiritual development that has four stages. This is a cycle of spiritual development that is from the teachings of pastor, author, and speaker Brian McClaren. He proposes a four-stage model of spiritual development in which questions and doubt are not the enemy of faith, but rather a portal to a more mature and fruitful kind of faith. The four stages—Simplicity, Complexity, Perplexity, and Harmony—offer a path forward that can help sincere and thoughtful people leave behind unnecessary baggage and intensify their commitment to what matters most, relationships with God, others, and self. And, Brian McLaren actually starts with a Stage 0 in which life is a party and is about pleasure-seeking alone. Common thinking at this stage is “let the good times roll!” and “I want to make sure my needs are met.”

At this stage God is like a magic lamp, a genie who is summoned. Stage 0 is before we make a commitment to love and live like Jesus. I am sure you know plenty of people at this stage.

Then we move up to Stage 1 or simple faith. At this stage you are either right or wrong, in or out, God is good, we are bad. This is a stage of strong opposites, of us and them. It's a good stage to begin at, in fact we all begin here, because it gives clear lines and clear rules to follow. The Ten Commandments offer guidance to all of us, but especially to the young and those who are at Stage 1 in their spiritual development.

Then perhaps through disorder and reorder some move up to Stage 2. At this stage we have a pragmatic faith. Faith help us get through the ups and downs of life. With Stage 2 faith life is full of problems to be solved and goals to be achieved. At Stage 2 the purpose of faith is that God can help me achieve my goals, to be a better person, to be a more faithful follower. At this stage following God is a logical, rational path that brings me to the desired outcome, generally eternal life and a place in heaven. Unfortunately, most of our churches teach us to live with a faith that keeps us stuck at Stage 2. So when disorder happens, some still cling to Stage 2, and others work through the difficulties and move up.

At Stage 3 mystery is accepted and even expected. There are things that are just unknowable. At this advanced stage we ask big questions of why a good God would allow tragedy, illness, and death. At this level we sit in the tension of not knowing all the answers. Paradox is part of this stage of spiritual development when we allow things to fit together that just don't make rational sense. Stage 3 is marked by a trust in God even when life does not make sense. The Beatitudes are a good example of stage three wisdom. Some very holy people are at stage three, and it is a good place to be.

And then there is Stage 4 that has harmony. At this stage spirituality is marked by a life that seeks after, and actively pursues God's kingdom on earth. Stage 4 is marked by a life that integrates God into everyday living and seeks to synthesize things that are disparate. It is a stage of awareness that there is no "them", there is only "us." And, it is marked by a passionate desire to serve, contribute and make a difference, even at a personal loss of time, resources, or status. At this stage we achieving oneing and union with God and we see that Christ is in all and around all. Here at St. Barnabas our goal is to be God's discerning, inclusive, Christ-centered church, engaged in outreach ministry, growing discipleship, and life changing worship. In this way we hope to help you move forward in your own spiritual journey.

So, we have the wisdom cycle of life, death, and resurrection, and we have the cycles of spiritual development in which we continue moving upwards into union with God, others, self, and the rest of non-human creation.

And finally using the teaching of the spiritual guide, Father Richard Rohr, I want to look at the cycle of violence. It's hard for us religious people to hear, but the most persistent violence in human history has been "sacralized violence," violence that we treated as sacred, but which was, in fact, not. Human beings have found a most effective way to legitimate their instinct toward fear and hatred of the other. We imagine we are fearing and hating on behalf of something holy and noble: be it God, religion, truth, morality, our children, or love of country. And, to make ourselves feel better about ourselves, we create scapegoats out of those other people whose only sin is to be different than we are. In this way we start or perpetuate a cycle of violence in which the wounded wound others, who then wound others, who then wound others. This cycle of violence hides or masks our own guilt, and one can even think of oneself as representing the moral high ground or being responsible. It never occurs to most people that this cycle cause us to become what we fear and hate.

However, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus show us that Jesus defies both the scapegoating pattern and the cycle of violence. Remember, two thousand years ago, Jesus walked willingly into a human world defined, as it still is today, by violence and dependence on scapegoats. He was murdered not because God wanted or needed his sacrificial death but because as humans, when the stakes are high, we determine who is in and who is out through violence and death. But Jesus, broke the system because what was supposed to happen didn't. The scapegoat didn't stay dead. And the victors, in this case, didn't get to write the only version of the story. The scapegoat came back to life and told a different story, a truer story, a story about life and love and beauty. And through his story, Jesus revealed our ideas about God had been wrong all along. God and Jesus are nothing like the violent and vengeful world we live in. After his resurrection, Jesus did not bring down the wrath of God, but as I said a moment ago he brought life, love, and beauty. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus guides us to end the cycle of violence. He has given us several patterns of healing, He shows us that healed people heal people.

Today, we remember the healing that comes from sleep. And with Easter we remember the wisdom cycle in which death becomes new birth. With new birth we move forward in the cycle of our spiritual journeys until we are one with all. And when we are one, we see Christ in and around all. We end scapegoating and the cycle of violence. This is a fourth cycle, the Easter Cycle, in which we can see the beauty that is already with us and in us. We embrace the grace of God that is already there for us to grab a hold of. In this Easter Cycle we embrace grace and mirror the love

and beauty of God back out into a world that sorely needs it. Jesus is arisen into that love and beauty, and we can do the same. He is Risen.