

We have recently have had foreshadowed, in the Gospel readings of recent weeks, what I might now call, in chapter 9, as *Mark's Commentary on the Exasperation of Jesus*:

How many times have I told you, you faithless generation?

How much longer much longer must I be with you?

The father of a possessed child exclaimed *If you can, have pity on us and help us?*

If you can?

As Jesus later foretold the twelve of his sacred fate, *they did not understand and were afraid to ask him.*

And then, they still thought it reasonable to ask *who is the greatest among us?*

Jesus reply: *Anyone who wants to make himself first, must make himself last.* Herself works, too.

What a crew Jesus had assembled. Didn't he have better options, less obstreperous ones, especially the one he chose to manage their finances. Hopeless, and as noted, *exasperating*.

For ten years, I worked with a not entirely different crew as a counselor with a group of men at San Quentin State Penitentiary, men who had each taken a human life. These men were living in a hopeless desert, as prisons are.

Jesus' twelve's backstories were not as abject as these inmates, but Peter *had* sliced off the ear of a Roman guard, and, had Jesus not intervened, how much farther might an exasperating Peter have gone? The group's money man, Judas, led the same Roman guards to Jesus and his ultimate torture and death. A little wad of silver for his efforts. When Jesus was stripped naked and hung on a crossbeam, only John— among the twelve— remained.

Peter was evidently busy elsewhere, denying that he even knew Jesus. Murder, mayhem, shame-filled betrayal and lies. And just a bit ago, *I'm sorry, remind me, who among us is the greatest?*

Honestly, some of these men would have fit right in the group at San Quentin.

Into prison men bring their rage, shame, their guilt, their cynicism, all parts of their brokenness. Hoping they might receive—somehow— forgiveness. But over time, which is all they had, they do intense heroic *inner work*, done at the bone and into the marrow, as our friend Pat Moore might say.

That they committed heinous offenses—in theological language, *very big sins*—which also, in the economy of salvation, bore the seeds of their potential transformation. As the apostles clearly did and as ours do for us.

Let me paraphrase the mid-twentieth century French mystic Simone Weil: *We human beings would like to be ego-centric—i.e., the seed bed of our big sins—but ultimately, we fail, for the most striking truth of our wretchedness becomes the very source of our greatness.*

The Apostles, those closest to Jesus, the ones he loved, who in their hardscrabble way, loved Jesus, too, had intuited from the get-go this was the One to follow, this is the one who dazzled them with his interior beauty, his resolve, his compassion, and his absolute embrace of the errant selves they brought to him.

Yes, they also hid, much as we do, cowering, with their shadowed selves, their shiny but tarnishing *personae*. But Jesus saw in them desire, deep humanity, potential for greatness, of a very particular kind. The kind that comes from being broken. Like them, as we enter

consciousness, as we kneel, we pray, often silently, with open hearts and perhaps shuttered eyes, as we come to acknowledge **all** of who we are. These failings, these sources of shame, these anxious deficits, all contain the seeds of our own transformation. This is who God chooses, these twelve, these prisoners, these us, now gathered in this so blessedly named Church of the Incarnation.

Thomas Merton uses the lovely phrase—his mother having been French—*le pointe vierge*. Merton suggests at the center of our being there is a point of *nothingness*, untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point of spark that belongs entirely to God, this point *in you and in me*, a point that is *never at our disposal*, but from which God animates our lives. Our soul can meet and touch God at this virginal center, at this core, *le pointe vierge*. *Meet and touch God. Touch, feel and know the divine presence within.*

For, like the Apostles, like the lifers at SQ, we are the bearers of this blinding light—this resurrected person of Jesus, who illuminates our lives, and of those around us, and of those we love, and of those we are trying to figure how to love, and, significantly, and always, those *seeking a cup of water*.

Though Jesus appeared exasperated, what with the *cut off your hand*, and the *poke out your eye* talk, and the I don't even know what a *millstone around your neck* means—but it sounds bad—Jesus is suggesting the radical demands of following him, of being in his presence, of receiving him, knowing him in the other, and the *othered*, knowing him in ourselves, mystically experiencing him at our own *les pointes vierge*. Jesus is always inviting, instructing, *les pointe vierging* us.

I do not suggest I meet the radical demands of Jesus. On the contrary, on some days, I am frozen. On some days, I refuse. On

some days, I know just a little bit more than Jesus about what these demands will entail. On some days I deny what gifts the Holy One has bestowed on me, on some days I act just like his homies, arguing and boasting and creating chaos in my ego-self, and in my soul.

If you are anything like me, I suspect you have these days as well, or your own utterly unique versions of the same.

And yet...

This One we know us forgives us for our flawed humanity, and counterintuitively, uses our very flaws to heal us, that we might heal each other. And then heal the brokenness in our world.

He is touching us, holding us like the child in today's Gospel, he goes after the lost sheep we inevitably are. And in his endless mercy, forgives and upends us. I have even heard from this very pulpit that he delights in us, that he takes joy in us, and that he desires us. Words I did not know I so needed to hear.

Jesus loves the men at San Quentin, he loved his friends, and he loves us, beyond all measure, just as we are. This divine One lives within us, in every refracted moment, and most intimately, in the pristine chamber of our soul, in the *holy nothingness* of *le point vierge*.