The Rev. Kimberly Reinholz

Church of the Holy Spirit

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John 14:1-14

Being human is a sensory smorgasbord with eyes to see, ears to hear, tongues to taste, skin to touch, and noses to smell. These senses are most often simply tools for observation, but they also allow human beings to engage in inquiry and adaptation. How people engage with the world around us guides how we are connected to and aware of the rest of God's beloved creation.

In the Easter season, this year's Gospel lessons engage almost all the senses.

First, Mary heard Jesus' voice;

then Thomas wanted to touch his wounds;

Cleopas and the other disciple knew Christ as they ate bread;

Jesus tells us that those who hear his voice know him,

And now Philip asks to be shown the Father.

This spans almost the entire spectrum of human physical experience. Fortunately or unfortunately, looking ahead, next week's Gospel reading doesn't include anything about the "scent" of Jesus. Apparently, according to scripture at least, Jesus odor was unremarkable- even after 3 days in the tomb- which is interesting to note considering that when Jesus went to Lazarus' grave, the odor was definitely mentioned.

What is it about the human need for sensory input that compels those who follow Jesus to ask for proof, to see, feel, hear, and touch the Lord in his resurrected state?

With the Episcopal understanding of taking scripture seriously but not necessarily literally while understanding the Bible to contain all things necessary for salvation, I wonder if these inquiries for sensory connection to the risen Lord aren't especially for the generations of Christians who follow the disciples in the centuries and millennia since Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension.

Thomas and Phillip are seeking clarity and certainty amid the lessons Jesus is teaching them. Although they have learned from and followed Jesus throughout his ministry, they still have looming doubts and anxiety about whether they really understand all that they have been taught. So they ask questions and seek sensory input to put their hearts and minds at ease.

Jesus responds not with anger and frustration but with affirmation of what they have seen and experienced, and assures them that their faith is not leading them astray. They are beloved, welcomed, and included, and they have a place in the household of God.

What I see the disciples experiencing in the days and weeks after the resurrection is the fight-or-flight-or-freeze response to what is happening around them. They have experienced a traumatic event, and they are trying to figure out what it all means and how they are going to move forward.

As someone who lives with ADHD and, as such, experiences anxiety, often when what I perceive is out of sync with what I expect or desire, I relate to Thomas and Phillip's uncertainty.

Over the last few years, with the help of some pretty awesome doctors and therapists, I have come to be able to recognize this as sensory overload or overwhelm, which my brain and body perceive as an existential threat.

Essentially, for lots of folks who live with autism or other forms of neurodiversity, like ADHD, our bodies and brains cannot differentiate between being a true physical threat, such as being chased by a bear, and the choice that is unexpected or anticipated, like standing in the grocery store trying to decide if the 2% milk or the skim milk would be better. These two things are equally likely to send them into fight/flight/or fawn mode, which, in turn, leaves them unable to process, discern, and decide on the next best step.

This disconnect between what is and what is expected can lead to decision paralysis and executive dysfunction, meaning that even though someone knows something is true, necessary, and the right thing to do, they are still unable to do it. Because of the trauma loop of trauma and anxiety.

For the disciples, it seems that after they have experienced the trauma of witnessing Jesus arrested, tried, executed, and buried, they are in an incredibly anxious place to begin with. Only to be shocked when Jesus is again standing in front of them, resurrected from the dead. It is understandable that their responses would couple the anxiety with the fight/flee/freeze response, and that they would need something they could feel to get them out of the loop of emotional responses in their nervous systems.

One way that I have learned to overcome anxiety, trauma, sensory overwhelm, and executive dysfunction over the years is through exercises, which intentionally focus on the 5 senses.

While these are often called grounding exercises in therapeutic settings, they also share similarities with meditation, mindfulness, and prayer practices in various religious traditions.

Patterned breathing, mantras, reciting passages of scripture, using prayer beads, or embodied prayer, such as walking the labyrinth, are ways in which people can intentionally connect the body, mind, and spirit.

In our house, at times of overwhelm or overload, we will often use something that Owen's "Coach" taught us- 5, 4, 3, 2,1. When anyone is disregulated- anxious, frantic, fearful, or otherwise overwhelmed by what is happening around or inside them.

We stop and find five things we see, four things we hear, three things we feel, two things we smell, and one thing we taste.

This simple exercise allows the mind to set aside the fight-or-flight response and reduce the anxiety that accompanies it. Focusing on what can be sensed re-establishes what is real, what is true, what is happening in the moment, rather than what is worrying about the future or the memory of the past.

The Easter stories we know of Jesus encountering Mary Magdalene, Thomas, Cleopas, and Philip offer similar records of physical observances. Jesus as God is seen, heard, tasted, and touched. They taste and see and know that the Lord is risen indeed through their embodied experiences; they can let fear about what will be and grief over what has happened

dissipate, and then take the next step in their spiritual journey.

Through their desire to be connected to Christ, we know Christ. Not just because their stories were recorded in scripture, but because it is part of our history to believe that, in particular, Mary Magdalen, Thomas, and Philip went out into the world and shared the Good News with people far afield from Jerusalem and Palestine.

According to tradition, these were among the first apostles to go out into the world: Mary either went to Ephesus or Gaul, depending on whether you follow the Orthodox or Roman traditions.

Thomas was a missionary to what is now India, and the Mar Thoma branch of the Jesus movement continues as the Syrian Orthodox tradition.

Philip eventually made his way to modern Turkia (formerly Turkey), where he had converted a high-ranking Roman official's wife to Christianity and was executed. While we do not know precisely what Cleopas did after encountering the resurrected Christ, it is believed that he was eventually martyred for evangelism, as were the other three.

So what does it mean for us to be connected to these senses and these saints of the Church in our daily life and work? The desire to sense God appears in the remembering of their stories, which are recorded in scripture for our benefit, because we cannot taste and see, feel and hear, the physical Christ we see; we experience it through memory, reason, and skill.

We learn and read, we create art and music that can be seen and heard in response to the desire to be in a physical relationship with the divine.

We do the work we are called to do, and when we are in those moments of overwhelm, when our bodies freeze, or we want nothing but to run away because the doubt, fear, grief, and worry are all too much, then we pray.

We ground our faith in the experiences of the here and now and remember we cannot control what was, nor can we determine what will be, but we can connect with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in this moment by remembering and reconnecting with the experiences of those who heard Jesus' voice, touched his wounds, and saw the way to follow him into everlasting life.

The saints asked to experience what we need to know in our times of uncertainty, because it is through them that we come to know that we are welcome and included, and that a place is prepared for us in God's community.

There is room for us, and we are beloved, we are loved, and we are called to love others- and when we cannot because we are overwhelmed by it all, then we need to pause and take time to pray and pay attention to the current moment, not dwelling in the past or predicting the future.

I invite you to pray with me this way right now: close your eyes, take a slow breath, and exhale deeply.

Open your eyes and find five things you see that remind you of God's presence,

Listen for four things you hear that echo God's voice,

Reach out and touch, three things that provide God's comfort and care.

Breathe and smell two things that link God and yourself.

And in a few minutes after we have prepared the table, come and taste the

fulfillment of God’s promise to us and to all of creation in the Body of Christ and the Cup of Salvation.

Amen.