

Jesus Christ, you are a light to the world. Fill our minds with you peace, and our hearts with your love. Amen

I crossed over in 2003 . . . after years of ignoring the hoopla about Apple computers. I am now a convert. I must confess that it's lovely to not worry about computer viruses; though even today I still miss the right click on a PC mouse.

Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple computers, iPhones, Ipods, Ipads and much more, was in the news this week after the release of his official biography, written by Walter Isaacson. As we know, Steve Jobs died on October 5<sup>th</sup> at the age of 56.

For years I could not have picked Steve Jobs out of a crowd. Then after, the image that I will always remember is of a tall, slender, seemingly quiet man standing on a stage, in front of thousands, in front of the world in blue jeans and a black turtle neck shirt.

With a net worth of 7B as of September 2011, and ranked among the wealthiest people in the world, one would never have known it.

We know now, that he was not always the easiest man with whom to work; but there was something very genuine, authentic, for the good and bad about Steve Jobs – a man who is beloved and mourned by millions worldwide.

Of the many stories revealed about Steve Jobs, two strike a cord. The first was recounted in an interview of Walter Isaacson by Renee Montagne on NPR. Walter Isaacson tells us that Steve Jobs was unbelievably demanding, and would often 'walk into a room and call people idiots right to their faces and worse' (Montague, NPR).

He would say this is a dumb idea. This stinks. [In fact] in the original Macintosh team, they gave an award to the person who each year stood up to Steve Jobs the best. And the interesting thing is those who stood up to him the best, who pushed back, who said no, and who won awards, . . . those people ended up getting promoted (Isaacson, NPR).

The second story, published in the Christian Science Monitor on October 17, 2011, is from a commentary. "Steve died on the same day that a Nobel Prize was being awarded to the scientist who discovered that the universe is expanding at an accelerated rate" (CSM). The author writes:

Mr. Job's legacy is that he accelerated the quality of life on earth. And it is not only because of his inventions . . . He was mostly a model of openness to ideas that no one had ever dreamed of. Undiscovered ideas were limitless to him, only to be plucked by expanding one's vision and then working with others to make them real . . . He learned to stretch his thinking, and by doing so stretched ours.

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus speaks directly and boldly to the crowds gathered and the disciples about his disgust with Jewish leaders NOT walking the talk! In the passage we read, Jesus is specific about the ways in which they do not follow the law. He reminds his followers, and reminds us, that there is only one God; and that "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Mt 23:12).

If we stop there, we miss the wrath that Jesus delivers to the Pharisees, Chief Priests, Elders, and Sadducees in the Temple. In the following passage, described as "seven woes" Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites to their faces and worse; he calls them blind guides (Oxford Annotated Bible Notes, 35). The Jewish authorities were already on edge, after challenging his authority and attempting to entrap him. They would have killed Jesus, we are told, but they feared the crowds for they thought he was a prophet. Jesus knew that death was near, though he remained true to God.

So one might ask: where does that leave us? As I discerned an answer, I found myself going back in time.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, the story of Jesus is organized by common subject matter – five themes altogether (Oxford Annotated Bible Notes, 1). The Gospel passage this morning, from Chapter 23, falls between themes four and five. While we know that the Gospels were written years after Jesus' death, we also believe that God inspired these ancient texts. Theme four, chapter 18, is on "sincere discipleship" and theme five is "on the end of the present age." Whether Jesus wanted us to search for truth, or for us to remember what we have been taught, Jesus reminds us of the innocence of childhood.

In chapter 18 on sincere discipleship, when the disciples ask Jesus "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven," he responds: Truly I tell you, unless you CHANGE and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes HUMBLE like [a] child is the greatest in the kingdom . . . Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Mt 18:1-5). Jesus

reminds us that true greatness requires humility and forgiveness, and change from self-chosen goals. By humbling oneself, by being open and being stretched, by what we do NOT know and what we have NOT imagined, we can build upon what we do.

Of course, life can often become complicated. What was once clear, becomes murky or shades of grey. It's not that we no longer know or believe in what's right or just; rather, the challenge and complexities of life can make it difficult. I am quite certain that the Jewish authorities did not intend to live their lives in a manner that would be experienced as hypocritical. They were, of course, the very descendents of Moses and Joshua among others who led the Jewish people out of slavery, across the Red Sea and Jordan parted by God to the Promised Land of milk and honey. Devoted to God, having discerned how to live a righteous life, one might ask what went wrong?

Recently a seminary colleague sent me, and her closest 500 friends on Facebook, a website link by the name of TED. The subtitle of TED is "Ideas worth spreading." While I'm not always drawn to what might be classified as self-help material, this friend of mine is a very reputable source. The woman on TED who gives the lecture is self-described as a storyteller and PHD researcher from the University of Houston, Graduate College of Social Work. Her name is Brené Brown. The talk is approximately 20 minutes in length; if interested, well worth the time. Over one million viewers have watched this video.

Dr. Brown shares an idea worth repeating. After years of qualitative and quantitative research on vulnerability, courage, authenticity, and shame, she identifies a concept that she defines as wholeheartedness. In her lecture, Dr. Brown begins by suggesting that all of us yearn to be connected, to belong, to be accepted by one another. Connection gives us purpose and meaning in life.

Yet, she found that when she asked about belonging, people told her about disconnection -- experiences of being excluded.

As she probed deeper, she discovered that shame more than any other variable was the source that would cause connections to unravel. The feeling that there is something about me that if people knew they would think less; and I would no longer be of worth. We know these voices: I'm not good enough, not thin enough, not beautiful enough, not smart enough . . . all of us can fill in the blank. The other variable that was significant was vulnerability, the willingness to allow ourselves to be seen for who we are as a person.

At this point, Dr. Brown divides her research subjects into two categories: those who had a strong sense of love and belonging (worthy of connection), and those who struggle with connection, often wondering if they are good enough. Through her research, Dr. Brown found that the only difference between the people divided in these two groups is the belief that one is worthy. The very belief that one is NOT worthy is the variable that can hinder connection with another being.

Dr. Brown continued her research examining those whom she defined as whole-hearted people, those living from a deep sense of worthiness. She discovered these fortunate souls shared several common characteristics. They had the courage to be imperfect, they had compassion for self and other, they experience connection as a result of authenticity - they let go of who they thought they should be, and embraced who they are; and they embraced vulnerability. While Dr. Brown goes on to give more explanation, and while she does not say it, to me she describes the very characteristics that often make children fresh and lovable.

As for religion, Dr. Brown suggests "religion has gone from a belief in faith and mystery to certainty. I'm right, you're wrong. Shut up. That's it. Just certain. The more afraid we are, the more vulnerable we are, the more afraid we are . . . no discourse anymore . . . no conversation. There's just blame." Dr. Brown also suggests that it is why "we are the most indebt, obese, addicted and medicated adult cohort in US history." In reaction to feelings of vulnerability, we numb grief, numb shame, fear, and disappointment. Sadly, we numb joy, gratitude and happiness as well.

So where does that leave us? Dr. Brown encourages us "to let ourselves be seen, deeply seen, vulnerably seen; to love with our whole hearts, even though there is no guarantee . . . [We are] to practice gratitude and joy in those moments of terror . . . and to believe that we're enough . . . [When] we are kinder and gentler to the people around us, and we are kinder and gentler to ourselves."

Another story is told about Steve Jobs. When Steve was a child of 6 or 7, a neighborhood girl suggested that because Steve was adopted that he was not wanted or loved by his birth parents who gave him up. Steve said it was as if a lightening bolt struck him. He ran home to his adoptive parents in tears. Steve recalls: "I went back to my house and talked to my parents . . . and they said no, no no, Steve, it wasn't as if you were abandoned. We specially picked you out. You were chosen" (Isaacson, NPR).

May we always remember that we are loved by God for the very aspects of self and being that make us special, and worthy, always worthy of being loved. Amen.