

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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Epiphany Seattle – Todd Foster
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Breakthrough!

God is faithful to reveal God's self.

In nomine...

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my father who is in heaven. (Mt 16.17b)

I. Tae Kwon Do

Recently my daughter and I began practicing Tae Kwon Do together. It's good exercise, good community, and more intellectually stimulating than some other forms of exercise I've tried. In Tae Kwon Do, students of a certain rank are required to use their bare foot to break a pine board, or boards, as part of their promotion test.

At the last test I attended, the lead instructor explained that: *Breaking a board is an act of faith.* Breaking is an act of faith in your own technique and in the instructors who taught you. I witnessed this to be true in the faces of the students testing that day.

The size of the student didn't really matter. I saw one tiny, tiny little girl there: she might have been 6 or 7 years old. She barely let the instructors set up a board for her before, *Bam!*, she broke it and calmly returned to her seat. Other students, nearly all of whom were much larger, approached their breaks with a variety of attitudes. Some, like the little girl, were confident. Others didn't really believe they could do it. Sure enough, they would bounce off the board a few times, not genuinely committed to break, until they were asked to sit down. Still others approached their kick with a mixture of doubt and hope. I enjoyed watching their expressions transform into shock and bewilderment when the board actually broke! Most had faces clouded with fear before and shining with delight afterwards.

This was literally a “breakthrough” moment for each of these students. As I witnessed that test, I thought about what a great symbol those breakthroughs are. How, I wondered, does this relate to our faith as Christians? What are those breakthrough moments that make faith real, give purpose to our practices, make our faces shine with the knowledge that we are beloved of God, and change us into different people?

II. Peter’s Confession

The Gospel lesson today recounts a breakthrough moment for Peter! One of the twelve disciples, a fisherman by trade, and a devout Jew, Peter had been traveling with Jesus for some time. He had listened to Jesus’ teaching for hours on end. Peter had witnessed the miracles Jesus performed. Peter and Jesus had been through a lot together. Yet, you might recall, our Gospels frequently recount Peter’s foibles and his lack of faith.

In this moment, Jesus asks his disciples, *Who do people say that I am?* The disciples report back what they have heard: Jesus is compared to John the Baptist, the most recent sensation on the religious scene. He is compared to Elijah, or to Jeremiah, or to another of the prophets. People are trying to use old categories to understand who Jesus is. They want to contain Jesus so that they can know what to do with him.

When Jesus asks the disciples who *they* think he is, Peter immediately pipes up with a double answer. He says, *You are the Christ, the son of the living God.* First, he says, you are the Christ, the anointed one. That was a bigger category than a mere prophet. Messiah hearkened back to the days of the ancient kings who had been chosen by God, like King David. Jesus, said Peter, was no ordinary religious leader. Jesus was something bigger.

Peter goes on to call Jesus *the son of the living God.* Peter says, You’re not just another man, another prophet. You don’t fit into the forms and categories we’ve always used before. You’re tangled up with God in a whole new, different and unexpected way that I am struggling to understand.

Peter is looking past Jesus' secondary characteristics: the miracles and the teaching, and beginning to perceive the true nature of who Jesus is: the presence of God in Jesus.

Jesus answers Peter, "Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah." You have had a breakthrough. And this breakthrough is not something that was given to you by flesh and blood: it is a gift straight from God.

What an amazing thing! Peter and the other disciples have been walking around with flesh-and-blood Jesus for months or even years. They have heard Jesus' teaching and seen Jesus' miracles. But it is not flesh and blood who has given them a breakthrough: insight into the nature of God. It is Jesus' Father in Heaven who has done it. Jesus has planted the seeds, the disciples have been diligent, in their own faltering ways, to receive those seeds. But it is God who has caused the shoots of comprehension and relationship to sprout up in the disciples' hearts and break through the crust. God is faithful that way.

III. Invitation

Doyt likes to talk about church as a gym. A place you come to work out your spiritual muscles with specific exercises like worship and fasting and prayer. It's a place where we find community for our work-outs: encouragement, instruction, and guidance on good technique. At church we find ways to practice and stretch our faith. We tell stories, we enact sacramental rites, we declare realities that are unseen and immeasurable. We practice things like Baptism, communion, weddings and funerals. Daily prayer, meditation, Bible study, confession, and service to others. All these practices are designed to connect the reality of what we see to the realities that are unseen.

If we are awake, we will encounter a rite, like communion for example, differently every time. When we break bread together, we *may* approach in *confidence* that God is present, or perhaps in *disbelief* that God even exists. One day we may experience *doubt and hope* that God just might make a difference in our lives, and on another feel nothing but *fear* that we might be let down. Our lives are constantly changing, so that God's mercies likewise are new to us every morning. Sometimes we approach God and just bounce off, having nothing to show for it afterwards but a dull ache and longing. Maybe even a bruise! That's part of the learning.

Sometimes, when God judges the time is right and we are ready for it, our efforts will be met with a breakthrough: a subtle shift in understanding or perhaps an overwhelming sea change in our whole way of life. God is faithful to meet our efforts and to give growth in the ground that we have prepared.

From these breakthroughs come keys to the Kingdom of God: spiritual gifts. Things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are just some of those keys, those traits that mark a life embedded in God's Kingdom. These are the keys to the kind of life each of us longs for. That which separates us from our goal is not as solid and forbidding as it looks: the barrier is actually quite brittle, and easy to break through. It helps if you have reasonable technique, but what's most important is to have faith that it is God who empowers you.

The thing about breakthroughs is that they're both harder and easier than they look. In the spiritual life, they are a gift of God, willingly and joyfully given.

It takes faith to approach the communion altar and hold out empty hands, ready to receive.

It takes faith find a quiet, lonely place and say, "Hello, God."

It takes faith to show up to a small group and to decide just how vulnerable you're ready to be today.

It takes faith to decide that there might be something to be gained in skipping a meal or three in order to fast and pray instead.

It takes faith to walk up to that board and announce which kick you're going to use to break it.

It takes faith to believe that God is there and God cares for you. But if you can muster just enough faith to give it a try, my experience is that God will meet you there. God is faithful like that. And when that happens, get ready: you, like Peter, are about to have a breakthrough.

Sermon Questions:

1. What have been some breakthrough moments in your life?
2. How did you prepare for those moments? Did you feel ready?
3. How has God prepared you in the past for breakthroughs in your life of faith?
4. To what new breakthrough might God be calling you today?