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The Cosmic Santa - Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Born in Berea, Kentucky on June 1, 1955, he was reared in Cincinnati, Ohio where his father was the Assistant Principal and Social Studies teacher at Princeton High School. His mother, an inner-city nurse, died of colon cancer when he was just 17 years of age. He, himself, graduated from Princeton High School and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in philosophy from Davidson College in 1977. He began a journalism career in 1979 with employment as an editorial writer for *The Greensboro Record*. From 1981-82 he held the same position at *The Virginian Pilot* in Norfolk, Virginia and in the following two years he edited the editorial page for *The Daily Press* in Newport News. This opened the way for him to serve in the same capacity for *The Detroit News* from 1984-87 and then for *The Washington Times* from 1987-91. From 1993 to 2000, several papers published his columns including *USA Today*.

Though an award winning journalist, Robert Anthony Snow, otherwise known as Tony made his transition as a player on the political scene when he became a speechwriter and later Deputy Assistant to the President for Media Affairs for the first President Bush. From 1995-2003, he hosted *Fox News Sunday* which eventually made way for the *Tony Snow Show*. Even as he became more visible on the political landscape, so he strove to become more visible on the musical landscape as he played in a band known as Beats Workin'!

He was joyful soul who loved music and who never minced words and maybe that is what attracted the second President Bush to him when he called him to be the 26th White House Press Secretary. In February of 2005, Snow was diagnosed, like his mother before him, with colon cancer and its recurrence took his life on July 12, 2008.

But, prior to his death, Snow shared a message from his heart that spoke about how he dealt with his cancer and his message, at its heart, is really the same message of our scripture today. I invite you first to hear these words of Scripture from Mark 6:30-34, 53-56.

The whole of the Markan Scripture passage is simply too long to read in our short time together but just prior to the report given by the disciples to Jesus, they had been out healing people on their own. Jesus had taken them aside and empowered them to go out two by two to share the good news of God with strict instructions to take nothing with them and to shake the dust off of their feet from the places and people that would not accept them or hear the message of God.

Their journey had been a successful one as they reported to Jesus here. It is evident to Jesus that they have learned well and now the next lesson of ministry is in order. They are tired—exhausted really—and since they have given so much of themselves the time had come to retreat and restore themselves. Jesus knows that such restoration comes only in finding one's center and that one's true center rests with God.

The disciples took to that idea and were ready to roll! They felt the weariness and thirsted for the renewal about which Jesus had spoken. So imagine their frustration when all of these people showed up wanting something from Jesus! They knew what it felt like to expend oneself for others and in their hearts they knew that this time was about them and not about a throng of people

As Tony Snow began to speak about his cancer, he realized that he had a choice as to how to view it. He could see it as all about himself—the woe is me mentality—and he could ask over and over again, “Why me?” But he realized that sometimes there are things that cannot be answered and he realized that if he kept asking that “why me” question, he would never be able to move beyond himself and offer God a place to work.

Jesus seated the five thousand strong throng and calls upon the disciples to feed them. But, the disciples had that why me mentality. Why can't I rest? Why do I have to be the one to pass out food to all of these people? Why can't they go away and find food on their own? They can fend for themselves. After all, I am due my time! Who among us has not posed such questions as some point in our lives?

The disciples are astounded that Jesus would call them to feed all of these people noting that it would take them eight month's salary to provide for them. So without verbal response, the man of great faith took two loaves of bread and five fish and fed five thousand people with leftovers for the disciples to gather. If Jesus could feed them, then the disciples could at least pick up the leftovers.

I wonder if Jesus felt disappointment in those disciples. Here he'd sent them out to share the good news and to heal people and they had missed one of the most primary lessons. Their failure to grasp the need to move beyond themselves, to learn that life is not about them—was made palpably real in the exchange with the five thousand.

If anyone is to find his or her center, the path to that center begins with moving beyond oneself!

Snow said that he “didn't know why (he had) cancer, and (he) didn't much care. It is what it is, a plain and indisputable fact.” He noted that none of us know how the story of our lives will end but we do have the ability to choose how we live it between this moment and our life's conclusion. Snow understood that life was not about him but it was about him allowing God to be his guide and allowing himself to be God's vessel in this world.

That was the lesson Jesus had been trying to teach the disciples. When we find our center, the path to that center begins with moving beyond ourselves and allowing God to fill us with God's spirit and use us for God's sake.

We are told in the Scripture that **immediately** Jesus sent the disciples out on the boat and ahead of him to Bethsaida while he dismissed the crowd. Jesus had to have been frustrated with them so getting them on the boat to have their rest was the best gift he could give them. Then stealing away from the crowd that they were to him to find his own centering time with God was the best gift he could give himself. Jesus knew that, if we have moved beyond ourselves and allowed ourselves to be God's vessels, then, we don't get to pick and choose the times when we want to be of service to others. We don't get to define service by our convenience. When God needs to use us, we need to respond. It was and is a simple fact. We can serve joyfully or selfishly but our attitudes will reflect how far or near we may be to living with God as our center.

Jesus prayed on the mountainside and communed with God. His holy time was renewing and then as evening broke, Jesus realized that the boat was smack dab in the middle of the lake and here he was on the shore. As he looked out at the disciples he noticed that there was a wind and the disciples were struggling against it in their efforts to row. I can imagine Jesus shrugging his shoulders. When will they ever get it? They could have used this time to relax and allow the wind to carry them but they are so bent on doing things their way, in their time that they are expending added strength unnecessarily. So, with the shrug, Jesus began to walk toward them on the water. When they saw him, they freaked out. They thought he was a ghost. They became fearful and worried. Jesus speaks, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." His words are reminiscent of God speaking to Moses at the burning bush, "I Am that I Am." It's Me—God—and you cannot truly have faith and trust in me if there is fear and worry in you.

Tony Snow noticed how easy it was to think about death and how difficult it would be. It made him anxious and worried as he thought about saying goodbye and what would happen to his friends and family. But then he realized that the worry was useless. It was truly getting him nowhere. He realized that if he wanted to find his center, not only did he have to move beyond himself, allow himself to be God's vessel but he also had to surrender worries and anxieties that simply didn't serve him well. He had to realize that the God that lived in him was and is a God of peace and hope. So if that God was dwelling in him, peace and hope must be dwelling there too and his job was to embrace them.

The disciples' reaction to Jesus must have broken his heart. He had spent so much time teaching them and preparing them to be his hands and feet in this world—to multiply his ministry. Here they stood on a boat wrapped in fear. They had not understood the value of feeding all of those people and now it was just clear that their hearts were hardened. They could not know peace and hope and therefore they could not know God as their center.

The story of Tony's cancer shows us that God is like a cosmic Santa. While it would be easy for us to sit in his lamp and demand things from our list of wants, the truth is that if God is really our center, then we have already moved beyond ourselves. God already lives within us wiping away all fears so all that is left for us is to be like children on Christmas morning and to awake to the gift that God has already left before us. When we do that, we simply stand there in awe of what God can do.

Snow says, “There’s nothing wilder than a life of humble virtue—for it is through selflessness and service that God wrings from our bodies and spirits the most we ever could give, the most we ever could offer, and the most we ever could do.”

Jesus must have spoken similar words to the disciples and even if he never said those words he certainly lived them. Jesus’ love for God was the fuel for his love for others and that fuel gave way to the spilling over of goodness—of peace—of hope and of healing.

Jesus and the disciples’ landed on the shore at Gennesaret and there throngs of people came to be healed. His healing was so longed for and needed that those who understood their need of it made their way to marketplaces and any possible place they might get a simple yet powerful touch of healing love.

At their core people thirst for God and if they tell you otherwise, you can be sure they are living an illusion. The people on the shore thirsted for God to be their center and in their quenching they understood that when we find our center, we awake to the gift that has been awaiting us all along—we awake to this moment and we simply take in the power of relationship with God and with each other. In the power of that moment, love lives.

Tony Snow’s words are profound when he calls us to ‘learn . . . how to live.’ “Most of us have watched friends as they drift toward God’s arms, not with resignation, but with peace and hope. In so doing, they have taught us not how to die, but how to live. They have emulated Christ by transmitting the power and authority of love.”

Are we doing that? Are we emulating Christ? We have chosen to call ourselves Christians but are we living like it? At a very base level all we have to do is find our center in Christ. All we have to do is practice self-denial, claim the perspective of being God’s vessel, release our concerns, watch God grant us peace and then watch as service opportunities appear for us that aren’t about our agendas but are about God’s grace. When we achieve those five steps, we awake to the power of this moment, we awake to the gift that has been waiting for us, we awake to claim our center.

If anyone of us fails as the disciples’ failed in this endeavor, the church becomes the less. Snow calls us to understand that our role here as the church is to be a body of God’s vessels called to different manifestations of the same purpose. God needs us to allow him to use us. The Cosmic Santa that we call God is simply waiting for us to wake up and claim him fully. My prayer for us all is that we will indeed, wake up!