

## **Worthy**

The Rev. Paige Fisher  
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During my second week of classes in seminary, we had a visiting brother from the monastery come and visit the first year students. We all piled into this small living room and gathered on large sofas, floor pillows and these big over-sized stuffed chairs. We sat anxiously awaiting the spiritual wisdom that was sure to be offered us in this great holy man. We opened with some quiet reflection time and then we sat and listened. The brother spoke at length about his faith journey and what it took him to get him to go to that monastery. He talked about the benefits of a disciplined prayer life. His calming presence was a comfort to all of us who were feeling a little overwhelmed by the beginning of this seminary journey.

After he had shared a piece of his story, the brother asked if we had any questions. One of our professors asked, "If you could say one thing to this group of young people entering seminary and this time of formation for ordained ministry, what would you want to say? What do you want to leave with them?" He sat silent for a moment looking up towards the ceiling and finally he looked out across the room at all of us and he said, "You are not fraudulent. God has brought you here for a reason and you are supposed to be here. You are worthy of this call."

I don't remember everything he told us that day about his own spiritual journey, but I remember that command to us. I needed to hear it. You know, in his own spiritual direction this monk had listened to many people entering into ministry and he was forever struck by the feelings of inadequacy; the feelings of being "found out." There seemed to be this overwhelming fear that the "truth" would be revealed. That they, or we, were no closer to God than anyone else. In fact, we may well be less connected to God, not more.

In our Episcopal tradition we believe that the whole community of faith, all of us, discern together an individual's call to ordained ministry. So you can spend upwards of three years sharing your faith story to different committees of people who discern if you are truly called towards ordained ministry. It can often feel like a series of tedious hurdles that you have to go through and sometimes, in an attempt to expedite the process, its easy to begin saying what you "think" people want to hear you say, instead of really what's on your heart. You paint the image of yourself that you want people to see. So, by the time you sit down for your first class in seminary, it isn't surprising that one can feel a bit disingenuous. I have gone back to that early seminary conversation often. I needed to hear those words then and I still need to hear them today. I am not fraudulent and I am worth of this call.

We live in a world where appearances mean everything. From the size of the house we live in to the prestigious degrees that we hang on our walls. From the circle of friends that we run with to the important positions and titles we hold. From the schools our children

attend to the designer labels on the things we have acquired. Everything in our culture applauds and rewards a polished, shiny life. Even here in our own Christian tradition, we can become consumed with what being a good Christian looks like. What it looks like outwardly to the world, what it looks like day to day in our community. It's easy to focus only on those things that will show us in the most positive light in our faith. A friend of mine used to call it "getting his card punched for heaven" by sitting in the pew each week for worship. He got that "good Christian" punch on his card so he could go back to his regular schedule of life.

We don't live in a day in age that welcomes, or quite frankly, even allows for any shortcomings or flaws in any part of our life. To be vulnerable is to be weak and to be weak it to open oneself to ridicule and judgment. So quite understandably, we spend a lot of time in our life painting the happy, successful surface with all the right things so we don't have to be vulnerable or open to ridicule. We seek to live a life protected from judgment and protected from that scrutiny. Lives where we are able to keep the surface paint fresh and without blemish. Like the make-up painted on a face, we keep the crevices and wrinkles, the blemishes and scars of our life covered and hidden from each other and from the world. Often, we are waiting, just waiting. Waiting to be discovered. Waiting to be "found out." Waiting to be revealed to the whole world that we are not perfect and everything is not as it seems. We fear we will be discovered as being fraudulent in our own representation.

In today's gospel lesson, we meet a group of disciples locked in small room who are filled with fear. Earlier in this text but that we didn't read today, Mary Magdalene has just returned from the tomb where she was met by Jesus, and yet those gathered are struggling to hear her words and believe that the crucified Lord has indeed risen and made Himself known to her. As they sit cloistered in that tiny room, Jesus appears to them. However, it isn't until He places His arms out for the disciples to see the marks of His wounds on His hands and on His side, that they are able to fully understand that they are seeing the risen Lord before them. Thomas, one of the disciples misses this encounter with Jesus and when he returns to the group he claims that he too, will not believe until he is able to see and touch those wounds of Jesus. Thomas' wish is granted when Jesus returns and we quickly see that his fear and doubt are washed away as he proclaims, "My Lord and my God." So after the disciples realize that they are in the presence of their Lord and Savior, Jesus tells them, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

This passage today gives us three pieces of good news. The first good news is that we get from Jesus to all of us, even in our doubts and struggles, His undying love. He not only loves us in the shiny polished parts of our life, but He loves beneath the surface where the imperfections of sin and doubt lie. Jesus delights in us and He loves us completely. Just as He came to those doubting disciples locked in a room with fear; He comes to us and offers us the peace of His love. The peace of His full acceptance of who we are, both polished and unpolished.

The second piece of good news given to us in this text is the image of Jesus being made know to his disciples through His own wounds. Not in glory and lifted high above, but in

the wounds and the brokenness. He is open to being vulnerable and He lets Thomas reach in and touch the scars of His crucifixion, To touch the wounds of His own suffering. Its only in the witnessing of those scars that the disciples were able to fully see Jesus, to fully recognize the Lord before them. By His own appearance to the disciples, He shows each of us a different way to be with one another. He shows the power of transformation, when we are willing to open ourselves to being authentic, and to being real. When we are able to drop our guard a bit and reveal, a little more fully our whole story with people. We are able to touch them far more than in our guardedness and our jaded and often protective shell that we put around us to keep people from knowing us fully. This good news is that Jesus not only comes to us in our imperfections, but that he works through us and our imperfections, in the midst of our imperfections.

That brings me to that final piece of good news. This text offers to us the good news of a community of faith being formed and being sent. A new community has gathered and is going out and being sent out into the world. Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." We, like his early followers, are sent out into the world and His presence didn't stop with those few believers in that small room. No, He lives on today and will live on always. It lives on inside of each of us. He has sent us into the world so that even those who do not see may still believe. We may not actually get to touch the wounds in Jesus' hands or on His side, as the disciples got to all those years ago. But we do get to touch the wounds of one another every day as we embody Christ in the world. As we seek to know and meet Christ in the world, we are invited and encouraged to risk meeting people, not only on the painted surface, but also beneath in the insecurities and shortcomings.

We are called forth in this lesson to love others in their whole being, the polished and rough underbelly. When we, in our own lives, are able to be vulnerable with people, when we are able to reveal a bit of that underside, then we invite people in and we make that connection of being able to touch one another in those soft spots of woundedness, of brokenness. Through the very witness of our own life we are able to offer other a glimpse of the abiding and faithful love that Christ offered those disciples and offers each of us. We are able to see the good news of a risen Lord, not only in a transfigured Jesus elevated above, but also a Jesus who was wounded, who was earthly and who was among us. We come to Christ and bring people to Christ, not only in glory and polish, but in our humble brokenness. Like that dear brother, so many years ago, that shared the good news with us, that we scared seminarians were indeed called, and indeed worthy. This passage offers us the same good news. That we are called out and that Jesus loves us and that Jesus can work not only on our polished and in our polished surfaces but even in the midst of our brokenness and our pain, Jesus is there and working through us day in and day out. Amen.