

Sermon: The Centrifugal Force of Love
Scriptures from Abrahamic Faiths
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We can think of it as there being two forces or movements within us – a centripetal movement that draws us in towards ourselves and a centrifugal movement that draws us outward from the self and beyond us. As described in Genesis, there was in the beginning for the human being an organic beautiful balance and flow between the two movements, the inward movement and the outward, the give and the take, and the absorbing and the release, until Adam and Eve took and devour the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and through it the flow between the centripetal movement and centrifugal movement was disrupted and something of a black hole was born in the human being, an interior whirlpool or vortex that drew and wanted to draw all things into itself and so this centripetal force began to dominate and the SELF became the center of the universe to them and that's how human sin and waywardness entered the world as we came to believe that we had to grab as much as we could, as often as we could, wherever we could to *fill* the void when all along the void was meant simply to be a spaciousness for the organic flow of life.

Now, in case you are wondering, I am totally making this up. There's nothing in scripture or anywhere else that describes it in this way, exactly, but it's just another way of thinking about it. For when we hear the scriptures of our faith tradition and in fact of all three of the Abrahamic faith traditions as we've heard this morning, the wisdom

that comes from them is most often an invitation or an insistence that we again allow the centrifugal force to move us, from the center of us outward. They all say it, that the human being is meant to be other-oriented, receiving into themselves only in order to BE for others.

So the Quran passage that Kamal read orients us outward towards the other by saying “do good and show kindness to your parents and to your neighbor and in fact to the stranger and the wayfarer.” You hear the movement from the close by to the far away, that’s the centrifugal force. The beautiful story from the Prophet Mohamed, peace be upon him, is another example. The centripetal, fill-the-void response to an annoying neighbor leaving trash at our front door would be ire kindled in the heart, resentment taking hold, plans for pay back, but the Prophet Mohamed, in being blessed of God, had that centrifugal force so strong and activated within him that he marched right over to his neighbor’s house not with anger in his heart but concern – “when your trash was not here, I came to check on you to see that you were alright.”

The Psalms from the Hebrew people are a beautiful treasury of pray, poetry and song, that also reveal this dance between the centripetal and centrifugal forces in the human being. You will read throughout the psalms these beautifully God-oriented passages and then confront these harsh moments suddenly where the Psalmist allows that centripetal movement to get the better of him and the self is offended and anger kindled and he wants God to justify himself and to punish the other. Psalm 139 is a great example of this. It’s going along so beautifully speaking of how we are formed in our mother’s womb and that God knows our every thought and it’s this exquisite reverie of

praise – “how precious to me are your thoughts O God, when I awake in the morning I am still with you” and the centrifugal force is bright and flowing, spinning out in a dance of glory toward God when all the sudden, almost as though the reverie is too much to take the Psalmist turns and says “If only you would slay the wicked! Get rid of the bloodthirsty! I hate those who hate you O God, they are my enemies!” And the centripetal force spins into a little hard-blackened center of anger and resentment. But just for a moment before the movement changes directions once again back out towards God and the Psalmist says: “Search me God and know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting....” You hear the flow back out of the self? What a beautiful prayer – “Search me O God... See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting!” from the tightening inward spinning knot to a loosening graceful letting go again.

And in the Psalm that Kerri read for us this morning from her own Jewish tradition, we see the outward flow in full force as the Psalmist reminds us that the Lord is faithful forever and what that faith looks like is: He “upholds the cause of the oppressed and feeds the hungry and gives sight to the blind and watches over the foreigner and the fatherless and the widow,” all those way out there on the margins of society, in the hidden places of our cities, out in the darkened corners of our awareness, that’s where God is tending and where the Psalmist calls out attention, way out beyond us, away from our judgments and our self-focused lives, out there to the others who need safe harbor themselves ... it’s where the heart of God is.

And then we come to our own Christian scriptures, here in Eastertide when we are reflecting upon the resurrection stories of Jesus and his appearances to the disciples and there the same dynamic is at play. You better believe the centripetal force was mighty strong in the disciples after they watched their Lord and Savior tortured and executed by the state. Fear, as it always does, got that centripetal force activated and calcified in them and they closed in on themselves huddling in the upper room. Some of them, terribly disappointed, disillusioned and depressed having had all their expectations flattened, returned to home to pick up their lives where they had left them. Others walked the long and lonely roads back their hometowns, heads bowed, hearts broken. These were followers and lovers and disciples of Jesus who had their lives liberated by his presence who somehow took their small, narrowly focused lives dominated by the centripetal force of self-absorption and blew them wide open, sent them spinning and dancing out from themselves to their neighbor and the stranger and to God in a way that they had never experienced! But with him crucified and gone, the centripetal force was very quick to turn back inward with fear and sorrow and disappointment...

And then He returned. After all they had done to him, you'd think he'd return with anger, resentment, desire for vengeance – that the forces would be swirling inward in him, a threatening vortex of power, but with Jesus... it was not so. This man, love incarnate, was such a massive centrifugal force that the swirling vortex black hole that came to be with Adam and Eve suddenly found in it's true center Christ and

the spinning centripetal force of destruction and death began flowing outward toward others in a centrifugal dance of creativity, care, and life!

Mary Magdalene again gives us our example and way forward. She sees Jesus resurrected and what does she do? She grabs hold of him, wants to pull him into herself, never ever let him go again, this is her moment with Jesus alone, filling her void totally.... but Jesus says “do not hold onto me, go tell the disciples I have returned.” And you know what Mary does, most faithful of the disciples? She let’s go. She lets him go and she runs to tell the disciples what has happened. And on the Road to Emmaus, the disciples who are turned in on themselves in their confusion and grief, walk with a stranger who is Jesus and they only recognize him once they welcome this stranger into their home and sit at table with him to break bread together, and finding themselves broken open, the flow outward is rekindled even as Jesus vanishes again the moment they recognize him so their search for fulfillment and safe harbor- you see - for themselves is only found through the centrifugal movement of love out toward others. To the question “will you harbor me, Jesus?” Comes the answer – “will you harbor them?” For I am in them and they are in me and if they are with you, you are with me... and that movement is the full and free flow of the Spirit of the risen Christ.