

Easter 3
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

April 19, 2015
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Patterns of Love

My fruit trees have all blossomed. The sour cherries still have a few blossoms clinging to the twigs, but we are now at the stage of seeing baby fruit forming. It's a process I have not been close to for much of my life, and life here in Silver City has opened my eyes to it. Like all of you who have fruit trees, I have been watching the weather. It seems a crap-shoot every year whether there will be a late freeze that kills all the fruit. Apricots seem especially vulnerable. We don't have an apricot tree yet, but we know people who do. ☺ Most years they lose their crop just when it seems most promising! Every year we hold our breath, cross our fingers and hope for the best.

The next stage is a long one, where the trees leaf out and begin doing their Summer thing. We clear out the ground growth beneath the trees, I spray the apples and pears with an organic pesticide for codling moths, we keep them watered, and we watch the hope of the fall grow on the branches. Then comes the harvest. In late May we'll look for cherries. In August and September we'll pick peaches. September is summer apples, and November is the fall apples. Finally, the leaves will fall from the trees once more, the sap will descend into the roots, and winter will drive the trees into dormancy. Throughout the cold months we will have applesauce, and canned peaches, the cherries having all been eaten fresh!

This process, from year to year, helps us understand the Scripture lessons today. Two of them were written by the same man. One work in two volumes, Luke and Acts have one underlying theme that appears over and over again. He traces a continuous line of the Holy Spirit's work from the Old Testament to the New. Now I have heard a hundred times if I have heard it once that to our eyes the Old Testament seems to talk about a different sort of God from Jesus. We do not see clearly this line of continuity, yet this Biblical writer insists there is.

Just as each season with my fruit trees is different and yet the overall patterns are the same, the language and imagery of the Old Testament is quite different from the New Testament, yet when one looks more deeply into the texts one can discern common patterns. Just as the patterns of my trees are due to the nature of the trees and the local climate, the patterns we see in Scripture are due to the nature of the text. It describes the interplay of the desires of God and the responses of humanity. Sometimes we see events that are related symbolically rather than historically. They display aspects of how people understood the God of the Hebrews, and sometimes those understandings changed with

time. Sometimes they got it right, sometimes they got it wrong, sometimes what is reflected in the text is an understanding of God that changed with time as greater truth came to light. The traces of a God of love emerge over the span of the texts.

As Christians we hold that in Jesus Christ we see the fullness of God manifest in human form. One might imagine that the patterns would stop then, since we now have the final word, but that is not the case. Not only is Jesus the culmination of all that the Old Testament was leading to, as the author of both Acts and Luke claims, but as God incarnate Jesus is a mystery that is still beyond us, into which we are being called. The patterns of growth are still there. We're still moving forward into the heart of God.

Jesus himself anticipates this continued growth. He told his disciples before the crucifixion that there was much he needed to tell them, but that they were not able to handle it at that time. He promised the Spirit of Truth, the advocate, the Holy Spirit, and this Spirit of Jesus would lead us into all truth. We now face different sorts of situations from Jesus' day. Jesus said nothing about cell phones, international air travel or the internet. The structure of human relationships is different. In order to respond faithfully to changing times the Church is constantly listening to the leading of the Spirit. How can we best apply the eternal truths of the heart of God to the life we live now? We must do the best we can in light of what we have to be faithful and relevant at the same time.

The Church has several ways of talking about it. Our Eastern Christian friends describe it as a three-fold process. They are all ways of being transformed by love.

Katharsis: I had a dream last week that stuck with me for some time. In my dream I was doing some rather infantile things. Suddenly, in my dream, I realized how foolish I was being, so I decided to change. From then on in the dream I didn't do those things. Aurelius Agustinus Hipponensis was a Roman philosopher and rhetorician. He was very well educated and came from a wealthy family. His mother was a Christian, but he had never paid much attention to her teaching. One day, when he was 31, he listened to the reading of Athanasius's Life of St. Anthony. He heard a childlike voice in his heart telling him to "take up and read, take up and read." He picked up the Bible and read from Romans, chapter 13. He converted to Christianity, and became one of the greatest theologians the Church has ever known—Augustine of Hippo.

These are stories of katharsis, where we come to an understanding of how our lives do not measure up to the standard of what we were created to be, and come to a moment of conversion, of change of direction. Katharsis is when we actively turn from our wayward ways and begin again to walk toward the heart of God.

Phosis: I am reading a book right now about how the concept of the community of faith was formed throughout the Bible. It's an exhaustive work by a very bright scholar, and I am learning incredible things from him. Saint Maxim of the 4th century heard the words of the Gospel read one day in Church, "pray without ceasing." He determined to do just that, and went out into the desert to learn to pray without ceasing. He spent his life at it.

These are stories of phosis. Phosis comes from the same root word for which we get "photography." Photography is handling of light to produce images. Phosis is a handling of the light of Christ in our lives to produce the image of Christ in our hearts. It is the process by which our hearts and our minds are illumined by the truth of Jesus Christ.

Theosis: Retired Bishop Bob Hibbs is a dear friend of mine. He's got a voice like Charleston Hesston, James Earl Jones or Morgan Freeman. And he's got a heart to match. When you're in his presence you know that you know that you are in the presence of a holy man. Aurelius Ambrosias was a Roman official in the late 4th century. By that time Arianism had been declared a heresy in the realm, but pockets of it still flourished. In the city of Milan, in Italy, the tension between the orthodox Christians and the Arians flared into a social crisis, and Aurelius was sent to settle the matter. When the assembled people saw him they began to chant, "Ambrose Bishop, Ambrose Bishop!" He was not trained in theology, he was not ordained, he wasn't even baptized! He certainly didn't WANT the honor! However, within a week he was baptized, ordained priest, deacon and then Bishop, and he became one of the greatest bishop theologians of the 4th century. The people of Milan recognized a holy man when they saw one.

These are stories of theosis. Theosis is the forming of our hearts and minds and souls after the likeness of Christ, the bringing out of our truest nature within, stamped with the image of God. It is the end of our striving, the purpose of our disciplines as Christians. It comes as a gift, given by the Spirit of God, unmerited and unearned, yet only evident in those who have experienced katharsis and phosis. It is always known imperfectly on this side of the grave.

This process describes the work of God in the world. It can be traced through the stories in the Bible. People and peoples are constantly challenged by katharsis, stretched through phosis, and some displayed beautiful lives of theosis, all of them drawn by the unconditional love of God toward God's own heart. It can be traced through church history. The Church has repeatedly had to question itself and change courses. The Church has been taught and enlightened by brilliant minds, and the Church is, by the grace of God, on a journey into ever clearer expressions of the image of God within it, by

the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

What does it mean for you and me now? Personally here are ways we can get a handle on it:

Katharsis is a willingness to be changed. The Christian that cannot be surprised is not open to katharsis. The Church should always be ready to be led in unexpected directions. Katharsis means that whenever you say, "never" to God, God takes it as a personal challenge! Katharsis means being open to the work of the Holy Spirit to move us in unexpected directions and ways.

Phothisis is a willingness to be taught. The Church should always strive to teach, form and encourage. Head knowledge is important, to be sure, but the heart also needs to learn ways of responding to God that have proven over the years to be helpful. It takes study, work and application, and confidence in the Holy Spirit to finish what we start. Phothisis means knowing that the more you know about God the more you know you don't know.

Theosis is a gift that comes with surrender. By the grace of God the Church ought to be a place where people come in touch with God. Theosis cannot be achieved, earned or created, and it cannot be controlled. Theosis is the work of the Spirit within you and me making the image of God more and more visible to the naked eye. It is often invisible to the one in whom others most clearly see it. Theosis means becoming one with God, fully human, fully alive, fully awake and fully surrendered.

A word of caution: These are not ways of measuring oneself or others. It is not about comparing, assessing or judging. They are ways of describing the paths we have walked and helping us discern where to go.

As surely as the seasons turn and the trees blossom, leaf out, fruit and then go back into winter dormancy, the Holy Spirit in the Church is leading us ever around through these phases of spiritual growth. Just as the fruit of my trees are gifts of the earth to the joy of our hearts, so the gift of growth is a fruit of the Spirit, given for the joy of the world.