

Breakthroughs
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If your family is like mine, certain words or phrases repeatedly pop up in conversation. It's as if Velcro is attached to them. One such word in my family is "breakthrough". As far as I know, it comes from a 1970's self-actualization program called the "Forum". "Breakthrough" describes the weekend - moments when those gathered gain new insights about themselves and their relationships. The insights are so dramatic and life-changing - it could only be a "breakthrough", a move from one reality to another. I never attended but several other family members did and introduced the word. Eventually, we all started using it. Now, it's most commonly used in my house by my husband, Daniel when recalling that day's golf game - as "I had a breakthrough today." - proclaiming a good 18-holes. Or more often, "I didn't have a breakthrough today."

Breakthrough might not be a common word in your family, but I suspect you've had the experience - a moment, time or situation when something about your life changes. It might be how you think, how you feel, how you choose to react. There's a shift. The ordinary and the expected are no longer ordinary or expected. I wonder if such a breakthrough happened for those gathered when Jesus begins to speak in the synagogue at Nazareth. Although his words from Hebrew scripture are ordinary and expected, somehow, they are heard differently. "All spoke well of him, and were amazed at the gracious words that came out of his mouth." In fact, their reaction causes them to question if they really know him. "They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" A familiar member of the community suddenly isn't so familiar anymore. Amazing.

Jesus continues to speak. Their reactions change again until "all in the synagogue were filled with rage." Such rage leads to violent action — an intention to "hurl him off the cliff." Hardly a leisurely game of golf or the intensity of a self-help weekend. Yet, a breakthrough. Somehow the very presence of Jesus, the way he speaks, the words he utters stir something deep inside the hearers on that Sabbath morning. And we know it is only the beginning.

Everywhere Jesus goes, he causes a "breakthrough". People change. Lepers and women dare to breakthrough imbedded social protocols. They touch him. They beg for his touch. With Jesus, they are able to break through the label of being outcasts. They return to community. Religious leaders challenge Jesus from inside their rigid, tightly-constructed wall of rules and judgements. In response, Jesus poses a question. Or he quotes a scripture passage. With Jesus, they face their narrow, exclusive vision of God's love and promise. The walls they built cannot hold, leaving them with only anger and revenge to justify their superiority and control.

Throughout his life, Jesus offers people a moment, a chance to break through. By his healing, teaching and choices, Jesus breaks through the patterns and expectations of his day. People see themselves, others and God, all creation profoundly different. In John's gospel, Jesus calls this breakthrough "being born again" The apostle Paul speaks of "putting on the mind of Christ".

Yes, he lives in his world - he is Joseph's son - yet, Jesus also lives as God's son. His life and words are grounded in and flow from the oneness of God's love because Jesus himself is a

breakthrough. Fully human and fully divine, Jesus holds all things together by breaking through the usual pattern of thinking - the mind that unconsciously divides, analyzes, pulls toward the distinctions, emphasizes differences. separates reality into them and us, sinner and chosen, insider and outsider, friend and enemy, male and female, young and old. And I believe that Jesus' coming to this consciousness awareness of oneness is, itself, a breakthrough.

Maybe his breakthrough came in hearing and holding God's voice deeply inside - "You are my son, my beloved.... Or maybe his breakthrough occurred in the wilderness. Over that time, he refused to succumb to the false premise that life is solely about our efforts to obtain security, power and privilege. Or maybe Jesus had many, in deed thousands of breakthroughs, in every moment, in every encounter, when he again and again and again grounded himself in his inner place of holy oneness.

And maybe the hardest moment is on the cross when nothing looks or feels like love, when, most alone, nothing seems to hold the promise of oneness. And the words Jesus utters don't seem like "gracious words": "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?". Yet, even then, the words utter from Jesus' despair paradoxically are directed to God, revealing an inner place reaching out to God. Oneness holds. Jesus breaks through the temptation to believe he is truly alone and forgotten by God.

Yet, there is more to Jesus' breakthroughs. Jesus' life from the Sabbath morning in Nazareth to the cross on Friday afternoon in Jerusalem is meant to lead us to our own breakthrough moments. Just as during his own life, Jesus' presence turned people from accepting the narrow, divided way of thinking and viewing the world, so Jesus is present to us now. Jesus calls us to expand our assumed horizons and see ourselves more as one with others and all creation. Jesus calls us to become more aware of the divine within us and seek to live from that place. Jesus calls us to accept the gracious words that we, and all creation, are God's beloved.

Such a deep acceptance does not come easily. In fact, the great theologian, Paul Tillich, believed that there is only one sin: we don't believe we are lovable. All other sins flow from that illusion and that illusion is covered with Velcro. It's hard for us to shake it or more deeply open ourselves to experience love. Sometimes it takes a breakthrough.

For Bill, the first hint of a shift comes with a change in his brain. He is confused and forgets things more often. The change becomes so serious that he swallows his pride and asks family and friends for help. In the process, something else happens to Bill's thinking. For the first time, he realizes that all his life he has kept the people closest to him at arm's length, never deeply allowing their love to touch him or fully returning his love to them.

With this insight fresh in his mind, Bill attends the informal Wednesday Eucharist as usual. In the space allowed following the gospel, Bill decides to tell the small group about what he has discovered about himself. When it is his turn for the chalice, he dips in the bread as usual and returns to his seat. After all, have received, the priest consumes the remaining bread, turns his attention to the wine left in the chalice and has his own breakthrough. With Bill's story in his heart, the priest steps from the altar and walks over to Bill. For the first time in all of his years as a priest, with only his body as "gracious words", he hands the chalice back to Bill. This time Bill holds it and tips it back, drinking God's love through Jesus to the fullest. Nothing is said - not then nor in the subsequent Wednesday Eucharists when Bill returns to dipping the bread. Amen.