

Sermon – Sunday, December 11, 2022

Deacon Martha Farone

Strengthen the weak hands...

“Trust me,” I uttered in a voice ragged with emotion yet firm with conviction, understanding that it was all I could offer as my heart broke. “I do,” she told me. Gently clasping her gnarled, arthritic hands in mine, I looked into her cloudy eyes then let my gaze touch upon her full face, wrinkled by time, love, compassion, giving and faithful living...

The son of my long-time friend would soon be at there to take her with him to his out-of-state home, and I had to leave before he arrived. If I remained, it was likely that she would refuse go with him for a “visit”. We hugged, I tenderly embraced her diminutive stature, said I love you, and parted. Late that evening, I got a phone call telling me they’d gotten to New Jersey and that my friend was settling in, spending time with her granddaughters though not clearly remembering their names or relationship. Dementia had deformed her mind as destructively as the arthritis had disfigured her hands. I recall this as one of the most painful times in my life where my feeble knees needed firming and my fearful heart needed strengthening. It would be a wilderness time, I knew, as I navigated the highway without her near-by for the first time in nearly 30 years. Yet somehow, I understood it was the Holy Way.

It was many months before I was able to visit my friend in the facility where she had been placed after caring for her safely in the home became impossible to manage. The thought of seeing her again made me quite happy though I knew it would mean drinking from the cup of both gladness and sorrow. What I hadn’t been able to anticipate or fathom was the heart-bursting JOY I experienced when I entered the room and was greeted with her smile and outstretched hand. Truly it was a reason for rejoicing.

Today, this third Sunday of Advent, is sometimes known as Gaudete, or Rejoice Sunday. Each of our readings offer a message of hope, joy, justice, healing, encouragement, and a reminder to keep the faith and to trust.

The imagery contained in the Isaiah passage, for me, brings forth the words and message in a way that can’t be improved upon. Within it is the good news of the renewal of all creation. JOY will be the way of life.

As one looks around, listens to the news, reads a paper, talks with a neighbor, walks down a city street or country road, it seems clear that we, humankind and each bit of The Creator’s precious works, of which we’re gifted to be stewards and caregivers, is suffering from “ignorance and want”, words used by the Ghost of Christmas Present as he speaks to Scrooge.

Truth be told, far too few take responsibility for ravishing the gifts of creation, humankind and other, in carelessness and overconsumption of every kind. Our throw it away and get another, more and bigger is better, must have, fill the gap societies have taken a toll on poorer nations, underdeveloped countries, and the underserved and discriminated against, within our own neighborhoods. Water, air, and land pollution have caused the extinction of species, and the

destruction of this Garden of Eden, fragile earth, continues as the pursuit of personal happiness and fulfillment remain more important to those deaf and blind to concerns and needs of others and the Earth. I'm not saying one shouldn't be happy or experience delight in the pleasures of life; they are gifts to us and each other and are experienced in many ways, some of them quite simple and at little cost—a smile, a hug, a word of encouragement. It's when one's heart is harden and controlled by the idols that draw attention away from liberty and justice for ALL that we fall short. In my own discernment, I've come to find a distinction between happiness and joy. I understand joy as a key "element" embedded in my core. While happiness is desired and appreciated, I rarely if ever, associate Joy with "things" and find that it has more to do with being attuned to and catching glimpses of our Maker's peaceable kingdom through my relationship with the Trinity. It isn't fleeting.

Nontombi Naomi Tutu said the worship of God is about how we treat our neighbor, deal with the less fortunate, the stranger, the orphan and widow; it's faithfully modeling a way of being in the world in relationship with each other, the prisoner and the hungry.

So how might it be that you and I are called to model a way of life to bring joy into the lives of others and the peace of the Lord to all the earth? Evidenced by the good works and ministry and mission of our parish partnerships, we're headed in the right direction on The Holy Way. Speaking for myself, I've a distance to go. How about you? This season of Advent, preparation and reconciliation, pondering along with Mary and Joseph, maybe we can consider how it is we "preach" the dream of a New Creation to those who find it a *distant* dream? There are many, and not only during this season of Advent and Christmas, who are able to see only the turbulence and pain of the present day; whose hands and hearts are gnarled by the toil of daily struggle whether it be personal loss, hunger, thirst, discrimination, want in many forms, as others go about in ignorance of what it is our Baptismal Promises truly require (including care for creation). Though overlooking needs of others is, for most of us, unintentional, it's real nonetheless. That's why it's important to act as community and to maintain the fellowship that is required to fortify, uplift, and when necessary, gently correct each other as we travel the Holy Way together.

When we come across someone whose hands are weak, do we take them, gently in our own, offering a healing touch of understanding rather than an iron grip, requiring them to conform to what it is we believe to be true? And in doing so, free ourselves of prejudice and judgement? Is the way in which we listen, through our heart and not only with human ear? What are the gifts we possess and use to make firm the feeble knees of those weighed down by the countless ways today's powerful and selfish oppress, disregard and disrespect? How equipped are we to pastor to and care for those who are grieving in some way? Have we the courage of the prophets of past generations to speak the truth to human authority, firm in our faith, trusting and hoping with patience. Have we the boldness to remain true to the example of Jesus as followers of The Way? Will you and I spill the Living Water that is essential to nourish and quench the thirst of a parched planet and its inhabitants, by both sharing the love of Christ and working for just and equitable distribution of the life sustaining refreshment and survival of our rivers, oceans and streams?

Each week when we share Communion, the Host is placed in the hands of those who are weak and seeking solace but also praying for strength, pardon and renewal. Will we share the nourishment we've received from the Bread of Life, and do the work, planting seeds that will help to bring about the end of food deserts and famine and in turn, be reason for rejoicing and gladness as the wilderness and dry land blossom?

Jesus shares a reminder in today's Gospel, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' What reassuring words these are. I will leave you with this poem by Laura Martin, whose words, I find bring reassurance and motivation as well, as I journey with others on the Holy Way to that place where Joy is real.

Maybe you will not be called
With the coal held to your lips,
The rush of wings of
Ambitious angels
Covering you.
Maybe you will not be called
On a night when your name is said
Out loud three times.
And you start to shiver from being known.
Maybe the sea will not part for you,
Nor will you stand up in a small boat,
Command the storm to obey you,
And have the sky fall silent.
But maybe you will be called by
Fallen mustard seeds and
Open-eyed dreams.
Maybe you will be called by
The ordinary and the striking,
The place where your heart catches
More than once.
Maybe you will find a fig given to you,
Or a promise,
Or your way home in the
Growing dark.
Maybe you will know that
Your call is no less real
Because it comes with
Seeds in your hand
And the taste of fruit in your mouth,
With a sound so soft
It could have just been the breeze,
But it wasn't.

rooted in wisdom no dead wood here.