

29<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Cycle

Well, our country has finally managed to turn itself on again after a very rocky two weeks of being turned off. I don't know about you, but I felt my blood pressure rise every time I heard about the shut down, especially since my son Greg, who is in the navy was called home  $\frac{3}{4}$  into his survival training and now has to do it over again. It all feels a bit personal when your child is adversely affected.

I don't know if you all heard, but a 12 year old girl died of an asthma attack on September, a death that could have been possibly avoided if there had been more adults in the school. As I have come to say, we pay lip service to the line that it takes a village to raise a child and all they gave us was a skeleton crew. We nurses warned the superintendent, the mayor and the governor that nursing cutbacks would lead to tragedy and it did. This was a prophecy no one wanted to come true.

It almost seems as if we need an act of God to stop what can only be described as nonsense, dangerous nonsense, but nonsense just the same, where adults with decent educations and comfortable incomes refuse to compromise, to the detriment of the rest of us. It would be great if a Moses figure could walk in to Congress into the Pa. statehouse, into the school district building, hold up his/her arms, and say, "Just stop it, would you! Stop this right now! You will talk and work things out as long as I hold up my arms." And they all talked and talked until they talked themselves out all the while moderates held up the Moses figure's arms to keep the spirit flowing.

Instead, nobody seems to listen to anyone anymore and compromise, the bedrock of a democratic society is a dirty word. Far too many people- elected and non-elected- proceed with agendas that are less than useful and vulnerable people, who only want to get along, get hurt.

Alas, the work of democracy like the work of God in this world is a really messy business. There are far too many distractions in modern life. Many institutions have lost both meaning and respect and so many people seem just plain old mad – all the time. It takes really hard work to live within this messiness and remain a good person.

How do we live faithfully in a flawed community beset by constant stumbling and sin? What do we do when the world changes as we speak and things that used to work for us no longer work?

Our readings today are about persistence, about the heart to endure in the face of controversy and intransigence, about the willingness to keep on trucking when our arms get too weary and the impossible dream gets farther and farther away. They are about frustration, incomprehensibility, patience, and ultimately faith and hope in the ability of God to effect change.

I read and heard about a couple of people who demonstrate persistence. The Sufi saint Rabia of Basra, for instance, was kidnapped and sold into slavery as a young girl. Like many girls born into a society that has no respect for women, Rabia lived most of her life in a brothel. She wrote, unbelievably and in spite of her horrible living conditions, "What a place for trials and transformation my Love (God) put me, but never once did he look upon me as if I were impure. Dear sisters, all we do in this world, whatever happens, is bringing us closer to God."

I heard Elizabeth Smart on WHYY. Smart was kidnapped and raped by some really sick man with the knowledge and cooperation of his equally sick wife. Smart, who was in captivity for 9 months, said that she realized early on that she would do whatever she needed to do in order to survive. At the tender age of 14, she said that she knew God and her family would always love her, regardless of where her fight for survival took her. Elizabeth now heads an organization that fights the trafficking of young girls.

What gave them all that heart? All that strength of character? And ultimately all that love?

I think the letter to Timothy and our gospel give us some good advice. The author exhorts Timothy to "remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, which is capable of giving you wisdom for salvation."

Some may think about tradition, which is fine if that works for them. There is comfort in thinking that some practices date back centuries and have helped people along the way. For others, faith means action. Such faith can move figurative mountains.

Irena Sendler was a Polish Catholic Socialist who saved 2,500 Jewish children from the Warsaw ghetto during the Nazi occupation. As a worker for the health department, she smuggled out small children wrapped as packages or in toolboxes, larger children in carts buried under whatever, all at great risk to herself. She spirited the children out of the fate of certain death into Polish homes or to orphanages run by the nuns, all of whom risked their lives for the children.

As an old woman, Sendler said to her interviewers, "I was brought up to believe that a person must be rescued when drowning, regardless of religion or nationality." Whatever Sendler learned at her mother and father's knees served her- and the children she saved-well.

Timothy's mentor's second bit of advice urged him to use scripture as training for righteousness which would equip him for good work.

William Stringfellow, an Episcopalian, lay theologian whose work became the basis for William Wink's discussion of the working of the "powers" in human society, was said to have read the bible literally without all of liberal reservations many of us 21<sup>st</sup> century people have. And yet, he never was in bondage to the biblical idolatry that characterizes many who claim to believe that every word of scripture is inspired by God. Stringfellow wrote, "If Jesus is Lord, there is a reason to love our neighbor, regardless of what the powers and principalities say, from the pentagon to family values to General Motors have to say."

The third bit of advice comes from Jesus when he advises his followers to pray without becoming weary. I'm going to turn to Stringfellow again for his marvelous insight. "Prayer is not a means of asking for something. Prayer reveals every connection with everyone and everything else in the whole of creation throughout time."

What happens if we pray for people rather than getting mad at them? Can we fight them? Destroy them? Call them names? If prayer provides

this deep a connection with our sisters and brothers, is there not enough room for compromise?

In its own ancient and convoluted way, our first reading provides the fourth guidepost to living a good life – community. As great a figure as Moses was, chosen by God to lead a people out of disastrous living conditions, Moses could not effect change by himself. Moses not only needed help, he recognized that he needed help. He could not win the battle by himself. Moses knew that in the end, he, like all of us, are nothing but bit players.

How important it is to have companions on the journey! I recall reading the obituary of Larry's Boy Scout leader. It listed his name and the name of his late wife. There was no mention of his son, Larry's boyhood friend. No viewing. No funeral. No invitation for friends and family to call and ease his journey out of the world. I recall reading it and thinking how sad it must be to be this solitary! To have no companions to ease their way down the road!

We have been blessed here at St. Mary Magdalene with a loving, faithful community, steeped in faith, rooted in the gospel, and dedicated to prayer. Modern life has given us the freedom to worship anywhere or not at all, and we chose to come here together, a mishmash of people with lots of questions on our way to God, trying to make church work for us.

Together we try to order our own lives in accord with what is good and true, that is, what produces charity, joy, peace, and good will. We do this for ourselves, but also for others, perhaps for all of creation, as Stringfellow intimates, because the entire world may depend on how well we all can get along.

I don't know how we can export our community. Probably we can't. All we can do is lift up our arms in both prayer and effort and try.

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