All Saints’ Feast Day November 5, 2017

Revelation 7:9-17 I John 3:1-3

Psalm 34:1-10, 22 Matthew 5:1-12

I was in my classroom when my cell phone rang. I didn’t recognize the number, but I picked it up anyway. On the other end was a woman’s voice, with a British accent, introducing herself to me as Aliya Haeri, Director of the Rasooli Sufi Center in South Africa which runs yearly, an international conference on issues of spirituality.

“I am calling on behalf of our Center,” she said. “Would you please be our keynote speaker this year for our conference on the Universality of the Qur’an?”

I literally said, “Oh, you must have the wrong number. You’ve got the wrong person.”

“You are Jamie Hamilton, no? Who is writing about the work you are doing with students interpreting the Qur’an? We’ve read your essays and we want you to come and speak to us.”

My next thought, not spoken, was, “Are you kidding me?… No way. Isn’t there someone else who you could call? I’m not ready for this!”

She heard my hesitation and began to talk with me about why they wanted me to come and what I, as a Christian, could bring to a Muslim audience.

After our 30-minute conversation, I hung up with a confirmed Yes. And I was terrified.

I think we can all identify with moments like these- when we are challenged to do something beyond what we ever imagined we could do… be it hosting a dinner party for 20, planting your first vegetable garden, starring in the school play, starting a new job as a supervisor, taking care of a loved one who is ill, entering into university, operating in your first surgery, or preaching your first sermon.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ preaching debut. And I think he’s as nervous as any of us would be. I like imagining Jesus saying, “Who me? Really? I’m not ready.”

Jesus is getting a following; he is seen as preacher, teacher, rabbi, spiritual healer, and even maybe Messiah. And with the possibility of Messiahship, expectations run high. ***Could Jesus be the one***? The one to usher in the new Jewish kingdom that will overthrow the Roman Rule of cruelty and tyranny, and replace that oppressive state with a governance of equity, peace and law.

The crowds are comparing Jesus with Moses who delivered the ten commandments on Mount Sinai with his own two hands.

And now it’s Jesus’ turn. Jesus is climbing his own mountain. What will he deliver? Is he the new Moses? The new Ruler King? No longer is Jesus just hanging with his disciples. Crowds are appearing, waiting with baited breath for his deliverance.

A lot is riding on Jesus. And I think he’s nervous, especially given that he knows what he is going to say, and it’s not going to be what people are expecting. Jesus must have had his moments of doubt, hesitation, and fear. He’s human, after all. I like to meditate on Jesus’ anxiety. For me, a Jesus who worries is also a Jesus who is in need of deep prayer, relying moment by moment on guidance and sustenance from God. This gives me confidence in my own prayer life.

And then Jesus settles into his truth- ***his way*** of understanding ***his identity as Savior.*** He sits down, and finds his voice: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for those who are meek, for those who hunger, for the merciful, for the pure in heart, for the peacemakers, and for those who are persecuted. These are his saving words.

Are you kidding? How can this be? These words do not fit the crowd’s expectations. They want a king. They want a new kingdom. They want to know how to become citizens of this new kingdom. Their new King, their Messiah, should be strong and forceful and empowering, fixing things, while saving lives, and the land and the Law. There should be a sense of triumphant victory and hope and inspiration.

“Show us the strong hand, Jesus, not this vision that includes me, unworthy as I am. I feel broken, and this vision is broken. How can this weakness be blessed? Why would I ever rejoice and be glad?”

You know that feeling I had when I was asked to do something I could never imagine myself doing, and I thought… ‘Wrong number!! Wrong person.’ Well, now things are reversed: The flip side of the coin. People are saying to Jesus, “You’re wrong. You aren’t able to do this. Isn’t there someone else with a different message. This can’t be!”

I think a lot of people walked away from Jesus’ first sermon disappointed, maybe even resentful or angry. Jesus has fixed nothing, maybe even made things worse.

Here’s the blessing. In these beatitudes, Jesus is giving us ***his*** roadmap: You are Blessed because you are on the right road, the right path ***when*** you are poor in spirit, ***when*** you mourn, ***when*** you are hungry…… because ***you know longing***.

And ***longing*** is the way to find the Kingdom of God. Because in the longing (not the fixing), holiness reaches out and makes us like itself.

In other words, when we are hurting, feeling lost, needing mercy, trying to find peace of mind, thirsting for righteousness, in a state of need and vulnerability, this is when holiness reaches out, finds us and makes us like itself….. holy.

I don’t think holiness comes to us any other way. This is how we become saints. This is how we become blessed.

This week, I have had a couple of difficult conversations with my eldest daughter. She is in a tough place right now, discouraged and anxious and feeling down. And as any parent knows you are only as happy as your saddest kid.

And so, I say to my daughter encouraging things like, “Hang in there. You’re beautiful, it will be ok. You’re finding the pearl within your spirit, which doesn’t happen overnight.”

“Yeah, whatever mom.”

And then when I try to just listen and not fix, I am asked, “Can you at least give me some encouraging words.” OK.. Nothing I do is going to make anything better. I hang up the phone, feeling pretty helpless.

Yet, this is what I have noticed this week. In my own prayer life, I am praying in a deeper way for children and their families, and it has taken me to dark places- the opioid crisis in particular. I am really hurting in a different way for the misery of this crisis that is taking so many young lives, leaving so many behind in such pain and loss, which is so senseless, so hopeless.

In my prayers, in my longing, I am removed from my own anxieties, and I feel touched by God… something that I can’t plan on, practice, or entice; it just comes, filled with grace, and I feel blessed in these feelings of connections and love with parents hurting everywhere. It’s like a glance into the Unity of our Creator. My prayers feel more present, more buoyed up, more sincere, and more open. I feel as if my prayers matter, even though I’m not changing a darn thing.

***In the longing, holiness reaches out and makes us like itself***. That’s why I think it’s important to see Jesus in ***his*** longing, in ***his*** hurting, in ***his*** needing. The holiness reaches out and made Jesus like itself, holy.

And Jesus invites into that same process by praying the beatitudes. By living in our own longing, and in our mourning, in our hunger, and in our meekness, we are turning over our lives to God and finding the path to holiness and wholeness. And in that act of faith, we are living God’s will for us, not our own.

To God we belong and to God we return- something that can happen as a daily occurrence. And in that stream of conscious connection with God, we are eternally blessed, becoming holy, becoming saints, all of us. All Saints. AMEN