Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany January 29, 2017

Year A All Saints’ (Annual Meeting)

Micah 6:1-8 I Corinthians 1:18-31

Psalm 15 Matthew 5: 1-12

Blessed are the pure of heart for they will see God, Amen.

When I was in second grade, I was home from school with a bad cold, and one of my classmates knocked on our back door, bearing get well cards of good will from the school. His name was Steve. And it was love at first sight.

We became inseparable. We played gin rummy, hide and go seek, and Monopoly; we glued model airplanes, spent the night at each other’s home, ignored all the teasing from our classmates, and with his dad built a tree fort in the backyard (which was amazing). Yet, the greatest gift Steve gave me, besides his loyalty and friendship, was the gift of reading.

We had just climbed up the tree to our fort and Steve handed me a novel, and said, “I just finished this; you’re going to love it.” I had never seen a novel before- only the little pamphlets of “See Dick and Jane Run” at school… reading was boring. But I trusted him. He pulled out another book from his backpack, where we also kept our milk and cookies, and he said, “I can hardly wait to start my new book.” That afternoon, propped against pillows in our fort, we read and I still have the vivid memory of being lost in my first adventure brought to me by words.

Steve introduced me to the school librarian and soon I had books stacked by my bedside at home. Here’s a little known fact: I became obsessed with the lives of people who were blind. Not sure why. Maybe because they overcame great obstacles, or because I envied their feisty spirits, or because I was surprised by their ingenuity. It didn’t take long before I learned about Helen Keller, blind, deaf and mute and then that was it. I read everything I could about her. She became my first hero. She made sense of Jesus for me.

Like Jesus, she was miraculous, and patient and kind and a healer of sorts. She could identify people by the different vibrations of their footsteps, could “read lips” by feeling lips move through her fingertips and throats move through her thumb. She learned how to speak and she always talked about those who were marginalized, ignored, and disenfranchised. I was young, but I was old enough to know that it was usually the strong, the loud, and the convincing who held power.

But here in flesh and blood was the living beatitude- the ones that my nana always read to me from the Bible. Here was a woman who was poor in spirit, who mourned, who was meek, and who hungered for righteousness, and who was beckoning to me, not because of her might, but because of her humility, compassion and patience. Aware of the present moment, she knew how to abide in Jesus.

I wanted to be like her.

There was much to mourn, but her tears had nothing to do with her limitations, in fact she felt blessed by her limitations. Imagine! That was one of those “aha” moments for me.

Rather than think about herself, she mourned over the suffering in the world and that the only answer to the pain and anguish of the weary came by helping your fellow men and women. The only excuse for being in this world. And in the doing of things to help others, lay the secret of lasting happiness, enduring joy.

And even though there was a lot of insecurity in my own life at the time, I gleaned from Helen Keller’s wisdom and inner peace, that the love of Jesus was real and that there was such a thing called joy that had nothing to do with my day in, day out experiences. I didn’t have words for it, but I was internalizing through Helen Keller, and with some help from Jesus!, that security was a mindset, pure and simple and that it was all tied up with an “inner recognition that your neighbor near and far shares your humanity with you.” (Paraphrase of Henri Nouwen)

By the spring of my third grade year, Steve’s family had moved east because his mother died of a fatally fast moving cancer. Boom, he was out of my life forever. And then my father’s best friend was killed in a hunting accident. I was afraid and lonely and anxious, and with my own parents fragile, I turned even deeper to my books. I read every biography I could get my hands on, and reveled in others’ overcoming adversity, suffering and loss. And learned through the likes of John F. Kennedy, Davy Crocket, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Anne Hutchinson that the goal was the joy of inner dignity, a dignity which only came when it was intertwined with others’ dignity. And it didn’t mean you weren’t going to suffer. This gave me hope.

In *The Book of Joy*, experienced by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama, Tutu says, “Discovering more joy does not, I’m sorry to say, save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet, as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

What a beautiful summary of our Scripture readings this morning:

* What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.
* He does not give his money in hope of gain, nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.
* God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.
* Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad.

Jesus’ words this morning are not a prescription of how to be- e.g. you better go find some suffering because you think you will be blessed by it. That will lead just to a false piety.

Nor are Jesus’ words this morning a description of what life is like. It doesn’t take much to recognize that often it is the poor, the meek, the merciful and the peacemakers, those “fools for Christ” who will be maligned, sidelined and even killed. Truth be told, they often don’t win.

Jesus, this morning, is being prophetic. The way of the beatitudes is the only way to live and be fully alive. That simple.

So, like Jesus, throw yourselves into the hands of the Holy Spirit and hold on. The Holy Spirit is designed to guide you deeper and deeper to the love and need for each other, where there are no walls, no separation, no fear, no scarcity, no exclusion, no bans, no second class citizens of the world. Will there be persecution, hard times? suffering? Yes. But as Martin Luther King was reminded over and over, “keep your eyes on the prize, Martin. And pray. Pray. Pray. Pray.”

And take delight in the power of a small child writing a prayer on our prayer cards for the Syrian children who are suffering by war, or of people gathering in our parlor to speak about the need to confront privilege and the injustices in our prison systems, or the care a sister has to make sure her sister maligned by a stroke and who has little money has safe housing, or in the courage it takes to possibly run for office, or to take part in a march, or to protest, or to travel to Juarez, Mexico, or to volunteer at the food pantry, or to wash dishes at the Community Supper.

What does the Lord require of you? Throw yourselves into the hands of the Holy Spirit and hold on. Jesus will be right there with you, and you will be in the presence of the Living Lord, abiding with him every step of the way.

AMEN.

1. His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy* (New York, New York: Avery, 2016), p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)