

Fifth Sunday of Lent
All Saints' Church

April 2, 2017
Year A

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130

Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

Dear Lord, we pray, create in us clean hearts. Amen

In the early 80's, while living in New York City, I returned to my faith and deepened it through my church experience at St. Luke's in the Field, located in the West Village.

The church had a wonderful mix of people: university professors, kindergarten teachers, musicians, housewives, artists, shopkeepers, plumbers, doctors, students, and about 30% or so of the parish, (we weren't counting), were gay. One of my favorite parishioners, who came to church on his motorcycle and leather chaps, and who became a mentor of sorts, was Howard Galley, the working editor of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. For this Catholic girl, he was a godsend, as he taught me my way around the prayer book.

It was the early 80's and the "gay disease" was rampant and St. Luke's became committed to a ministry for all those who had tested HIV positive and for those who had full-blown AIDS. And I learned, mostly from men who were actively dying, what it was like to find joy and to love life in the midst of pain and death. A gift they gave me; one I carry with me always.

A couple, Bill and Volker, took me under their wing as the "newcomer" whom they would care for... and we became good friends. Bill was the first to tell me that he thought I was called to the priesthood. "No... that can't be," was my first response. He was persistent, and so was Volker, and with their encouragement, I let the mechanisms that roll toward ordination become active and these two men were with me in the process, consoling me when I was told "no" and affirming me when that decision was overturned. It was a wild ride, and not a very clear one, especially as I look in the rear view window back to those days, but this I know. I would not be standing here in this pulpit as your Rector without this couple's love and patience and faith.

In those days, HIV could turn quickly to AIDS, and too soon, too young, Bill was in the hospital. Volker called me one day; I was newly ordained, "Get here quickly, Jamie; we need prayers; he's dying."

I was uptown and they were at St. Vincent's, a good subway hour away. "I'll be there as soon as I can." As I walked into the room, Bill was sitting up with an oxygen mask on. As soon as he saw me, he took it off, much to the chagrin of the nurse, and he waved her off. He motioned me close to his cheek: "I've been waiting for you," he whispered. "Please read the prayers, 'At the Time of Death.'"

And we began; he had the responses memorized- so many times he had read them with friends who had died, and as soon as we finished, and I anointed him, he breathed his last.

I cannot not cry when I tell this story. It's been thirty+ years and my tears are as fresh now as they were then. Tears of sadness of course- I still miss him- how wonderful it would be to talk with him about my daughters....

And yet, these are also tears of joy- his passing was such a beautiful moment, and reminded me of the time I first held each daughter, minutes after birth, just fresh from God, reminiscent of how Bill was leaving us, fresh on his way back to God. This cosmic coming and going, literally *a passing* through the flimsy veil between life and death.... I can't tell you how many times, I've been at a death, since then, timed to prayer-perfection.

It's an in-between-time- when you're not really in this world, and yet you are, caught in the present moment that you can never fully grasp. One foot in eternity; one foot deeply planted in the rich earth.

I think this in-between-time is where Jesus is this morning.

On hearing that Lazarus is gravely ill, Jesus says, "don't worry"; his friend Lazarus is 'just asleep'; his illness "will *not* lead to death but to God's glory."

Jesus stays back two more days before setting off. I think this is a very human moment captured in these verses. Dare I say that Jesus is in denial, afraid, even stalling. How many times have I stalled before returning a phone call I know will be full of sad news, or entering into a hospital room with a terrible new diagnosis? You, too, have been there. You know what I am talking about. You pause, to get your act together, to remind yourself that you cannot avoid, and that you need to pray for help before you plunge into a deep well of grief and maybe even horror.

Jesus arrives in Bethany and goes to his dear friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. And they tell him Lazarus is dead! And there is a stench! You are 4 days too dead late! If only you had been here sooner, our brother would not have died!

"Where have you laid him?" And then the shortest and one of the most powerful sentences in the Bible comes next, so moved by his own question and the reality hitting him.

"Jesus wept."

I think we need to linger with Jesus in his emotion. He is moved to his core. His friend, whom he loved very much, is dead. It's here we need to watch and wait with Jesus in a Gethsemane that many of us know as well, as he stands in his pain, not doing anything, and not saying anything.

Watch and wait and be present, and hold and love and know there's not a damn thing you can do but honor the tears. There's no fixing.

These tears come from deep within, and I believe, whether they are tears of joy or sadness, they emanate from the same place of the soul, spilling over as a gift of life, of pain, of laughter, of meaning, of connection, of belonging, of fullness, of our human frailty and beauty and power. Who isn't moved by tears? It's universal. A gift of creation.

There's a precious moment for me as I prepare the elements at the altar. After the giving of the bread and the wine, the acolyte hands me a small cruet of water and I pour a little water into the chalice of wine. There are lots of explanations of what this act is supposed to symbolize. Here's what it means for me:

The wine (as is the bread) is from the fruit of our labor, from the gifts of creation that we present back to the Lord. The water comes from the primal elements of creation, not made by us, pure and the source of life. Water is beyond us, uncreated, even as it creates our very being. As I pour in these drops of water, I am also pouring into the wine our gift of tears which comes from the very source of our soul.

The water poured into the Cup is our gift of tears, the primal elements of our very being- what makes us human, what makes Jesus human, what makes us alive, what makes us connected to the Source of all life, the Ancient Heart of Love.

Pouring in this gift of tears is what makes our bread and our wine Holy, beyond us, yet the source of our very being.

As we hold out our hands and take the Bread of Life and drink from the Cup of our Salvation, we are connected to the home of our beginning. We're just a bit homesick all our lives for this home, the place of our beginning, the dawning of who we are as the apple of God's eye, a place, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. Like the haunting cry of the flute, we are the reed weeping, reminded of our true home which feels far away, yet, thank God, is seeded into the core of our being.

Just as Lazarus walks out of his tomb, and the dry bones come alive, we too are full of life. We have the order mixed up when we say "life and death." Creation begins in death first, the void, and then there is life. And there is no end to this life, wearied at times by chances and changes, yes, but in the end, we will rest forever in Eternal true changelessness. AMEN