

REFLECTIONS FOR THE SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 19 February 2023

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Abundant affirmation ~ astounding expectations: these two themes flow through our readings on this seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, the last Sunday before we begin our Lenten journey.

Abundant affirmation: three of our four readings today astound us with their strong affirmations very much in the spirit of God's words in the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis, "God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness'. . . So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God God created them; male and female God created them" (Gen 1:26-27). In two short verses, four times we are told that God creates humans in God's image and likeness.

In our reading from Leviticus, God again speaks, telling Moses, "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2). In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says twice, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you. . . For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (1 Cor 3:16-17). Jesus echoes the affirmation, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48). Created in the image of God, we are holy, we are God's temple, we are perfect.

We note that, in Matthew, the Greek word *telos* is translated as "perfect," but a better translation of *telos* is "completion, intended goal, or determined end." The sense meant here is that we would live into the complete person God calls us to be, that we grow into our truest selves just as God



lives into God's truest self. The Lutheran pastor, David Lose, says it well, "Be the person and community God created you to be, just as God is the One God is supposed to be. Jesus' words are less command than promise. God sees more in you than you do. God has plans and a purpose for you. God intends to use you to achieve something spectacular. And that something spectacular is precisely to be who you were created to be and, in so doing, to help create a different kind of world."

As Lose says, God, Jesus and Paul are not so much commanding us as promising us that we already are holy because God is holy; that we are already God's temple because God's Spirit dwells in us, that we are already perfect when we are the persons God created us to be. This is God's promise to us; we are the ones who choose whether to accept God's promise and gift.

Astounding expectations: how then do we choose to accept God's promise and gift? Our readings help give us the answer to that question. The reading from Leviticus (which will be quoted by Jesus when he gives us the Great Commandment) tell us, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev 19:18), reminding us that this means not hating in our hearts any one of our kin (think carefully what this may be saying to you!), not taking vengeance, or not bearing a grudge.



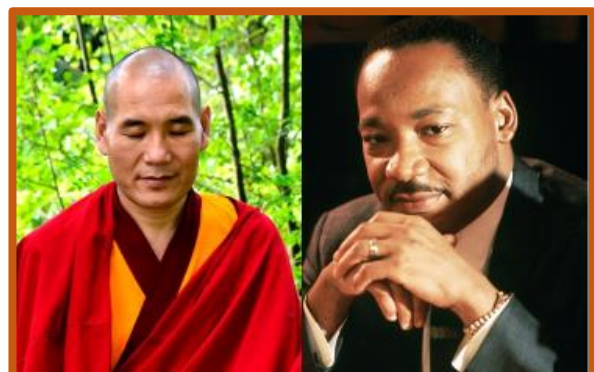
Psalm 103 (one of the best known and most used of the psalms of thanksgiving) shows us how God is as God is supposed to be and, therefore, how we who are created in God's image are to be: forgiving iniquity, healing diseases, crowning with steadfast love and mercy, being merciful and gracious, being slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, not dealing with others according to their sins, having compassion. The number of times steadfast love, mercy, compassion, and graciousness are repeated in these few verses sends a strong message of what is at the heart of our being holy, being God's temple, being perfect. It is noteworthy that the psalmist here is repeating the description which God gives Moses of Godself in Exodus 34. It is the most repeated description of God in the whole of the Old Testament. There is little wonder that Pope Francis reminds us, "God's name is mercy!"

Jesus' words, in Matthew's Gospel, are part of what we name the Sermon on the Mount (a conscious echo of Moses' words at the covenant-making at Sinai). The phrase from the Mosaic law, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Matt 5:38), was an advanced interpretation of law. It stated that the punishment for any violation of the law had to be proportionate to the violation and would be the same whether you were a powerful leader or a lowly peasant.

Now Jesus further advances that interpretation. The strict application of the law – the same application no matter what your status in the community, and the fair application depending on the violation – are taken to another level. Veronica Lawson rsm says it well as she concludes that Jesus is inviting us "to embrace a new way of thinking about and acting towards those who have injured them or us. What happens to us may be beyond our control. What we do with what comes our way is for us to decide. Jesus makes it clear that we have choices in the face of life's struggles. The disciple is called to assume personal responsibility and to refuse the way of retaliation. There are to be no limitations on love."

To be holy, to be God's temple, to be the one God calls us to be means that strictly obeying the law is not enough. All of us will see possibilities in our own lives to live what Sister Veronica interprets Jesus to mean, "Praying quite deliberately for those who give me a hard time or cause me grief is by far the most effective way of retaining my own peace of mind and of expelling retaliatory thoughts. It is a matter of gently bringing these people to mind, of breathing in the loving kindness or hesed of God that suffuses the universe and of breathing it out to them. Such prayer enables me to think of them in kindly ways and act towards them without rancour, even when these sentiments are not reciprocated."

There is a wonderful story told about the Tibetan monk, Phakyab Rinpoche, who had been tortured in a Chinese prison for twenty-two years. When he reached Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama asked him: "What were you scared of the most in prison?" He replied: "I was afraid that I might lose my compassion towards the torturers." This Buddhist monk fully exemplifies who Jesus is inviting all of us to become. Martin Luther King, Jr. echoes the same understanding when he



stated, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

The Scottish minister, Roddy Hamilton, says the same thing in his poem-prayer as he reminds us that Jesus is "love's rebel":

The enemy: love them
The oppressor: walk the mile with them
The Master: turn the other cheek to them
This doormat faith seems too much to bear
in a world where those who bully always seem to win
The enemy: imbalance them with love
The oppressor: shame the law that oppresses
The Master: turn the cheek as an equal
This rebellious faith seems too much to bear
in a world where those who bully are loved back to justice by the bullied
But this is heaven's revolution and we are called into it
come let us worship love's rebel, Jesus

Such abundant and astounding affirmation of what God not only creates us to be and expects us to be but actually trusts us to be is a previous foundation for our Lenten journey which begins on this coming Ash Wednesday. The Presbyterian minister, Thom Shuman, gives us the impetus to begin this journey with confidence and honesty:

Here, at the outer limits of Lent, we are called to walk:
to the paper-thin edges which cut us to the soul;
to the workplaces which weary us; to the people who confuse us;
to the faith which threatens us.

Here, at the corner of Steadfast Love and Faithfulness,
we are called to wait: when our clenched stomachs awaken us;
in the moments of unbearable sorrow; with the angels who would carry us.

Here, where time is fulfilled,
where God's Kin-dom is as near to us as our neighbor,
we begin Lent:
with the Beloved, whose tears wash away our fears,
with the God who will not let go of our hands.

Let us wholeheartedly and gracefully begin Lent: "with the Beloved, whose tears wash away our fears, with the God who will not let go of our hands."

