

A Lent 2

All Saints by the Sea, Santa Barbara

March 16, 2014

The Gospel in Miniature

These final lines of John's gospel that we have just heard proclaimed includes the verse that one often sees flaunted at baseball games and football games, when fans in the lower seats of stadium hold up large signs that proclaim: "John 3:16." (An outstanding quarterback from Florida even wrote the citation on his forehead so that when the TV cameras panned in on his face they would see: "John 3:16.")

It has been called "the gospel in miniature." Perhaps you too memorized this verse in Sunday school as I did: (in the King James Version)

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him (KJV!) should not perish but have everlasting life." There you have it: the Good News in one sentence.

I confess that when I see these signs being waved around so aggressively I am often annoyed. It's as if they were condemning those around them, the other 58,000 thousand people in the stadium—not to mention the millions watching the television screen. At such a time I'd like to be right next to them with ANOTHER sign that reads: "John 3:17"

For it seems as if they never read the very next line of scripture that follows John 3:16—"For God sent his son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved."

God sent Jesus into the world NOT to condemn the world, but that through him, we might ALL be saved. God sent Jesus into the world NOT to condemn us—how often we forget!--, but that through Jesus we might ALL be saved.

How DOES God save us? What might this salvation look like in the concrete?

One image I have of how God saves us is that of a woman named Pat who I first met through a cryptic voicemail message that she left on my telephone answering machine at the diocese of California.

The message said: "Hello, I want to do something and I don't know what to call it-- and someone told me that they thought you could help me...."

The next morning I drove to visit this person in the assisted living facility where she lived. When she answered the door, she was wearing oxygen prongs. Pat told me that she had been originally diagnosed with breast cancer 21 years ago. After initial treatment, it cleared up but then years later it came back again and now it has spread to the extent that Pat had sold her home and was receiving hospice care. There is not much room for pretending in Pat's life. She is pretty clear about approaching the threshold of eternity. I am a cancer survivor myself, and I know how a seeming mortal diagnosis tends to focus the mind on what is most important.

We sat and visited in her tiny but bright room. Finally I asked her, "You said that you wanted to do something. What is it that you want to do?" "I want give something," she said, "that won't ever go away. --Someone told me that might be called a "charitable remainder trust." Is that it?"

"No," I replied, "that is not a charitable remainder trust. What you are talking about is an endowment gift. An endowment gift is when you make a gift to a charity and the money that you give is never spent but the income from your gift goes on supporting the charitable work forever."

"That's what I want to do," she said. "I want to make a gift that won't ever go away."

"I want to give to four charities," she said. "My parish; Catherine's House for women getting out of prison; the Nature Conservancy; and SOS Children's Villages, because I once adopted one of their children overseas and they do such wonderful work for children."

"Will you help me?" she asked.

"I will be glad to help you," I told her, as she brushed back her thinning hair

“Can I ask you a question? Why are you doing this now? How did you come to this decision?”

Then Pat told me that last year she gave each of her two sons \$5,000, and she told them that at the end of year, she wanted them to tell her what they did with the money. (Doesn't this sound like a parable of Jesus?!!) When she asked the younger son, it turned out that he had spent it mostly on drugs and alcohol. With the old son, who is married, she said, used it to take some special family vacations. “That's okay,” she said, “but it is gone.”

“So I have decided that what I want to do is to leave each of my sons a sum of money, but all the rest that I leave behind I want to go to these four charities in some form that won't ever go away.”

Since Pat's parish does not yet have an endowment fund and since we might not have enough time to set something up at each charity, we set up an endowment fund at the Diocese of California to be funded by Pat's modest estate, and that will pay income forever to the four charities that mean so much to her.

Now each year in February I receive a thank you letter from SOS Children's Villages, thanking us for the annual gift from Pat's endowment fund and showing a photo of the child that Pat is continuing to support. Pat's pledge at her parish is still being paid- by the annual distribution from her modest endowment fund.

My interaction with Pat has had lasting impact on me. I have thought so often about Pat's sense of stewardship. She pondered how what she would leave behind might best be used, by her sons, and by her church and favored charities. You see-- Pat connected what she was leaving behind with her spirit. She seemed to understand that her financial assets were not merely inert piles of stuff, but rather could be infused by the spirit to become an expression of the spirit—her spirit and the spirit of God.

This found expression in another part of her life as well:

“Have you had contact with members of your parish,” I asked her. “Oh, yes. We are planning my service.” And her face brightened up into a beaming smile. “The closing hymn is

my favorite: “I’m Going to a Place Where the Soul Never Dies”, and I want everyone there to clap their hands.” And she demonstrated as she sang the refrain.

Pat’s faith was so very alive, and so very evident in how she connected her life in this world with her life in the next world, fully in the presence of God. For me Pat living and dying became a testimony to what it might mean to connect—as Jesus says in today’s gospel—spirit and flesh. And what it might mean truly to be re-born.

We can give meaning to all that God has given us by integrating it with our faith.

Last year on a layover at O’Hare, I shared a small round table in the terminal with gentleman who asked me what I do. “I’m a financial theologian,” I replied with a smile. “A what?” he said. “A financial theologian.” ... I meet with people like you and ask you to articulate what it is that most important in your life, most precious to you, deepest in your heart- your deepest values, your faith, really—Then I help them to bring their financial assets into alignment with what they say is most precious to them. So that their life makes a more integrated statement of what they want to stand for.

I suppose that one might also express this by saying that I try to help people bring together their flesh and their spirit. When are able to align our money with our hearts—with what truly means most to us—our giving flowers in joy.

What I know—and what also you have undoubtedly experienced in your own life—is that when we are able to integrate spirit and flesh—our love with what we have been given—then it can indeed be an experience of a new birth.

What is the most gratifying gift you have ever given? What has it felt like to make this gift? Giving ourselves—body and soul, flesh and spirit-- This, it seems to me, is incrementally rebirth into a life that shall not come to an end when our life on earth is over.

This is the life that we celebrate and are nourished in at this Table:

In the ordinary Bread and ordinary wine --fused with the Spirit of God—we taste the Body and Blood of Christ. We take this into our body as we feed on him in our hearts. And so we become what we are: re-born children of God, fused spirit and flesh.

Teilard de Chardin, the French Jesuit who spent his adult whole life in China, has reminded us that we are NOT human being living spiritual lives; rather, we are SPIRITUAL beings leading human lives.

This is what we taste at the Table of Eucharist. This is how God is saving us.

For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world; but that through him EVEN WE might be saved.

Thanks be to God!