

The Giver Of All Good Things

September 2, 2018

In closing our summer season together, and last week, finalizing our summer reflections on being God's beloved community to the world, and being a loving community to one another, I was inspired by some thoughts I was listening to from one of my own favorite teachers, John O'Donahue, on his thoughts on a call to suffer. It made me realize it that a lot of people in our parish, and this parish itself, are at the time to understand what it means to be called to suffer.

So I decided that a wonderful way to begin our new fall season together is to talk about the festive subject of suffering.

That will be my series in September, what does it mean? Why are we called to suffer? I was going to try to remember to wear a gift that was given to me by Bishop Ed upon his leaving All Saints to come to be your bishop back in the year 2000. He left me this crucifix, and when we moved offices I found it, after about 10 years of not being able to find it. The crucifix is, of course, one of the most ancient and original symbols of the Christian faith, and part of that redemptive call to suffer.

But I'm not beginning that this morning. I am actually drawn by both the collect as well as the scripture to the statement "the author and giver of all good things". James in his epistle recognizes God as the author and giver of all good things. So the question always is, in the matter of suffering, if God is the giver of all good things, why am I in the crap pit that I'm in right now? Why am I in this state of suffering that I didn't cause? And of course beyond our own suffering, we look at the world and just shake our head at the amount of suffering in the world. So a lot of people struggle with the concept of a God who is the giver of all good things.

But let's think about that. We do note that there is incredible suffering in our world, but we also know there is incredible beauty. There is goodness, there is compassion, and kindness. There is life, the gift of life. And I think our scriptures are trying to help us to cultivate the goodness of God in our lives, if you listen closely. Of course, I get the advantage of hearing these readings about 3 or 4 or 5 times a week, and what struck me was the 'this and that' of the scriptures. You notice how Deuteronomy lifts high the incredible gift of the commandments of the Lord, the statutes and the wisdom that are such a gift to the people of Israel, and in such a way that people will say that surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people. For what other great nation has a God that is no near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances just as this entire law that I'm setting before you today?

So there is a great thanksgiving for those ways that have cultivated a wonderful life, both within the ancient people of Israel and in our own lives. We know there is a way to live that recognizes the beauty of each day, the gift that each day is. We know the ways

of thanksgiving, of service, of kindness, of gratitude, cultivating those ways, giving ourselves to those principles. It's too easy to look at those things that have been given to us as the ways to live and say "Oh, but the people that gave them to us were filled with hypocrisy, they didn't do those things". But really, God has given us ways to live, ways to be, and we are best when we give our attention to those better ways to live, to be with one another.

So, recognizing the ordinances, the laws, the creeds, the things passed down to us by those who have loved us are so important in our lives. So we have that. Then we have the episode in the Gospel where Jesus is hanging out with his disciples and sharing a meal, and the Pharisees of his day, who have their right ways to prepare food, to wash their hands, to make sure the food is properly prepared. And they didn't do it only for health reasons, they did it because that was the way that the traditions taught them to do it, so that they would maintain the goodness of God in their life.

That was their point. Their point wasn't to be legalistic or rigorous, they were trying to maintain the goodness of God in their life. A lot of that food prep stuff probably kept them a whole lot healthier than a lot of people of their day who didn't know how to handle food, or who didn't know things about cleanliness. But Jesus pointed out something that is equally as important, as we give ourselves to following the right ways to live.

And that's the heart of the matter. If in our rule-following we have lost our compassion, we have lost our ability to accept and include others, we have lost the attitudes of kindness and goodness and grace, then the whole point of cultivating the goodness of God in our life has been lost to us. By keeping these rules, we've lost the very attitudes of heart that make life good and joyful and wonderful, not only for ourselves, but for the community around us.

The third thing I noticed was something that spoke to me personally, and that was Jesus' teaching here. There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile. But the things that come out are what defile. We actually know that things from the outside can come in to the body and defile it, and make it less healthy, and diminish the goodness of God in our lives. But I think again of what Jesus was saying. If we turn our attention to all the extremities and outside things, if we make sure that we are making the right impressions, make sure we are following the right laws, we make sure that everything's in line, that if we're not careful about what's going on in our heart, have we lost the ability to be quiet, to silently sit with God, to be thankful for our neighbors, to not only listen, and listen quietly, to let what we hear motivate our actions. To cultivate a quiet, reverent, peaceful, loving internal heart, because that is where God has put so much goodness within each of us.

To cultivate the depths of those places, to not only just apply the rules and laws that we have set for ourselves, but to let ourselves become kind and giving and caring people, and let our words be words that encourage and not criticize. To have thoughts and words that create instead of destroy.

So, it's a balance. This weekend our holiday is calling us to recognize the incredible worth that the laborers of our world, the workers of our world, bring to the great industries of our world, to recognize the balance of economy that is required to maintain the goodness of that economic system. This weekend when a man is remembered who spent his whole life working to bring two very different sides of politics together, who had very strong convictions of his own and fought tooth and nail for them, but did not lose the respect of those who saw things very differently, and yet respectfully.

I think God is calling us, even when we're called to suffer, even when we are in times of great pain and loss and grief, to still cultivate the goodness that is all around us. Because it is there, and it is within us as well.

Amen