

Let Go and Let God – Pent+17B

You don't have to worry, and don't you be afraid. Joy comes in the morning; troubles they won't last always. Remember there's a friend in Jesus who will wipe your tears away.

We can wait til we have no choice, til we're flat on our backs, out cold, or up some creek, or we can take a baby step, a child's step, however hesitant, fearful, tentative and halting that step may be, in the direction of allowing ourselves to be cared for.

It's good to have a gentle helping hand when I could use it. But how often do we hear, "Can I give you a hand with that?" and reply, "No thanks, I got it?" We will accept help only sparingly – even dubiously – lest our ability to handle things be called into doubt, lest we build up a greater helping hand debt than we would like to own, lest we be beholden to one another, trapped in a limitless but severely limiting ecumenical riptide of communities and relationships, non of which have any cub appeal or leverage at the ATM.

We so-called modern people are so intent on our self-sufficiency that we have engendered a whole array of occupations, a whole layer of our society whose concern, whose task, whose enterprise is to make us think we need whatever they have, despite the ready availability of evidence to the contrary. Inventors, entrepreneurs and speculators spend their lives coming up with ideas for things that can be sold. Publicists, marketers and ad-people spend their lives hunched over their chemistry sets of cultural and biological compounds, mixing up potions that, when consumed, make us want to run out and have whatever it is they're selling. A beautiful photograph – of some French fried potatoes; a gentle, comforting voice -- coming from some luxurious piece of

furniture; a sudden warning – about how much fun we’re missing if we don’t buy a certain automobile; a mythically handsome and sexy model, perfectly fit and powerful, yet perfectly vulnerable and available who will be ours for the taking and shaking -- if only we will act now.

Those sly come-hither stares, they’re witchcraft, the alchemy of desires that depart entirely from the humility, mutual understanding and compassionate support that form our deeper, more childlike desires, the desires God placed in our hearts from the beginning. Instead, we look into the smoky eyes of these sultry marketing creatures and allow ourselves to be convinced by them that whatever they’re selling is what will make us whole. Instead, it makes a hole in us. “Weeping may endure through the night, but joy comes in the morning,” cries the psalmist, reiterating the promise of God’s enduring love beyond time and space. But with far too much of what we acquire these days, with far too many of the choices we make about how to use our resources, with far too pervasive and proud self-reliance in our avoidance of requests for and acceptance of help, the opposite holds true: Any joy we obtain from these thoughts and feelings, triumphs and acquisitions may indeed endure through some nights, but inevitably we are led to tears that drown the promise of the dawn, when we find ourselves saying, “Oh, Lord, I’m still not sure what I stand for. What do I stand for? Most nights I don’t know anymore...”

Language lovers have noticed a new cultural tic in American speech. Someone comes over to us, with a pitcher of water, an umbrella, a set of directions, a pot of coffee. The good citizen asks some version of the question: “Would you like some?” Assuming, just for the moment that we do not desire whatever is on offer (we’ve had enough water, it’s not raining, we know where we’re going, we’re maxed out on the caffeine for the

week, etc.), how do we respond to “More coffee?” “I’m good.” “I’m good!” “I’m good... and nothing you can do right now can make me better,” is the rest of that thought. Of course people who say, “I’m good,” instead of some variation of, “No, but thank you for asking” are not all consciously hinting that they are entirely and triumphantly self-sufficient. They – we – are just using our current idiomatic shorthand for “We’re done here. Our relationship is suspended unless and until I have a new desire that I think you might be useful in fulfilling, like dessert.” You might come back with a sly come-hither look in your eyes and an outrageously worded and illustrated dessert menu – or trolley. But again, I don’t need you unless I decide I need you, and if I don’t decide I need you, then I certainly don’t want you hanging around. “Would you like to see the dessert menu?” “I’m good.”

Instead of merely announcing our state of mind and being, we could practice gracious acceptance of offers of help, whatever their origins or even their ultimate usefulness in a given situation. We could treat the most mundane and even spurious overtures into our self-reliance as worthy of full consideration – if even for a moment – and polite response. We could treat them as if the hand of Jesus were somewhere behind them, at all times behaving as if we knew we might be entertaining angels unawares. This is true even if our response has to be, “No, I’m not interested, I haven’t got the time to hear your sales pitch, and I’m asking you not to call me again.

Developing this approach to the small ups and downs, offers and interactions of everyday life – treating everyone as if they were an angel (however torn and tattered) can prepare and equip us for the more serious crises that each of our lives inevitably contains. So, for instance, some disturbing symptoms might lead to fearful avoidance of anything that

might exacerbate those symptoms, plus crossed fingers, denial and depression, or they might lead to a visit to a doctor. That doctor might ask for blood tests. The problem with blood tests is that, once you get 'em, you're stuck with the results. Just like when you say, "No, but thanks," you're stuck with a teensy little relationship with whomever offered you whatever they offered you. They might even say something scary like, "You are (most) welcome." "Aww, gee, now I'm in a 'thing' here. These people might be getting the idea they know me a little, and I them. I knew I shoulda just said, 'I'm good,' and nipped this thing in the bud.

Those blood tests might indicate the presence of a potentially dangerous cancer growing within one. And if one goes back to the doctor with the tests in hand, she or he might say one is facing a choice: roll the dice on your own quality of life – indeed your own existence, with the statistical odds stacked heavily against you, or hand the dice back to the doctor and say something along the lines of, "Thanks for giving it to me straight, discomfitting as this choice is. With your expertise, you have given me some clarity about how to go about choosing. I'm just gonna go get a second opinion from another expert in this and if it agrees with yours, I will put myself entirely in your hands, come what may. We will be in full relationship, with me being entirely vulnerable to your ministrations – for a time. Because you know more about what's wrong with me than I do, I choose to let you tell me what to do about it, I put my whole existence into your hands; I'm like a baby.

It is childish to follow our own ways and means when there are people with more information standing by offering help. That's children's job, to make mistakes, drive by red flags and gain experience of their own. But it is childlike to say, "Here I am; do

with me as you see fit.” The older we grow, the more likely it becomes that childishness on our part will bring discomfort, troubling complexity and even catastrophe down on our own heads. Harmful childishness involves an increase in collateral damage too, as our families expand and our ranges of options narrow. But childlike wonder, receptivity and trustfulness of those who offer to share their experience, strength and hope with us will propel us into nothing less than the Kingdom of Heaven, even while we’re still shuffling around in these our mortal coils.

Having just passed over the proverbial hump of a journey that involved lots of experts who knew more about me than I did, the decision to put myself, childlike in their hands, and total, fundamental vulnerabilities of various kinds while they held me, I can say recommend the experience. Not that I wish cancer on anybody, much less radical surgery. But being human, we are all going to be subject to the fragility of our bodies. This fragility will cause weeping from time to time. The joy is in making ourselves subject to something else more powerful than time and space and flesh. Joy comes in making ourselves subject to the immeasurable strength of God’s goodness. This goodness comes in lots of ways, through the deft and experienced hands of a surgeon, the kind attentions of hospital staff, the loving hands and faces of caregivers, in my case my beloved family. This goodness also might come in a marvelous company of good things to eat that flowed into our house in a steady parade this past week – Hallelujah! It comes in the miraculous evidence of physical healing, and the sense of humility and peacefulness that comes from clear, irrefutable evidence of my own mortality – I’m not in charge of whether I live or die, what a relief! Above all, God’s goodness comes in the warm, lively and wonderfully diverse voices the Holy Spirit brings into bold relief through the loving prayers of my

beloved community. If we have to be fragile beings, and make no mistake, we have to be fragile beings, then the only choice that makes sense is to surrender to our communities of love, to let go and let God handle the situation. God knows more about us than we do.

Upon hearing that a payday would have to be postponed, a great man once assured his out-of-pocket boss, "You can't fire me. You don't have to pay me, but you can't fire me." This is what surrender to community means. I may not be triumphant in any measurable way, paying out dividends unto the umpteenth generation. I may not receive the amount of ease, comfort and pleasure I think I deserve in this life I return for my payments; our physical existence is a fleeting one in the best of circumstance. But we can't fire God. We may stop listening, from time to time fear and pain and petulance may even render us uncomfortable, unconvinced and unbelieving, but the love will keep working just the same, even to the ages of ages, whether we allow ourselves to share it or not, whether we allow ourselves to be cared for or not.

Blessed indeed are those whose delight is the Lord. Like trees planted beside flowing waters, whose leaves shall never fade, they yield their fruit in due season, and all that they do shall prosper.