

Sermon

7/17/16

St. John the Evangelist

The Rev. Noah Van Niel

Proper 11 (C): Genesis 18:1-10a; Psalm 15; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

As violent global events continue to drag us deeper into the throes of despair, I thought today we might focus on the more individual level. I do so not in avoidance of dealing with the continued terrors of life on earth these days, but because I am of the belief that each of us have been blessed with a power to affect positive change wherever we are, whenever we want. And that such actions, when spread through our words and deeds will be the thing to save us, by the grace of God.

So with that in mind, I ask this question: Are you the person you want to be?

If you go to the book store (does anyone still go to book stores?) and if you wind your way to the section of religious books, you will often find some variation on this set-up: you have a small section of overtly religious books—Bibles, classic works of major theologians. Then there will be a larger section of books about “God” written from various perspectives: recounting of religious experiences, tales of courageous lives of faith. And this will then morph in some stores into a whole new section called “Spirituality” thereby furthering the unhelpful distinction in the mind of the public between “Religion” and “Spirituality.” And finally spirituality will give way to what is often the largest section, that can only be described in that phrase that is anathema to the life of faith, “Self-Help.”

Now I don’t have a problem with *all* self-help books. I do have a problem with many of them which encourage an ethos of selfishness and self-focus over and above others. But there are a number of those books which offer some really great practical solutions to being more intentional in your life, taking some control back from those mysterious forces that seem to suck up every minute of your day.

But it is the plethora of “self-help” books and their pseudo-spirituality that leads me to believe that, no, I don’t think most of us are the people we want to be. Maybe you’re different, but most of us, have something that we wish we could improve. Maybe it’s our body. Maybe it’s our job. Maybe it’s our habits. Maybe it’s our attitudes. There tons of reasons why we may not be the person we want to be. Why is that? What is really preventing us from being that person?

I think it’s because, like Martha in today’s Gospel reading, we are “worried and distracted by many things.” We can get so busy with the tasks of our life, that we somehow become dispossessed of it. We feel like we are no longer in control of things; we no longer know who we are. In Martha’s case, it is the task of hosting and all the busy work that entails. It leads her to forget to *honor* the person she is hosting, even when that person is Jesus. Have you ever had a party where you are so busy trying to pull the whole thing together that you didn’t even have a chance to enjoy yourself? Chances are you were worried and distracted by many things and those worries and distractions prevented you from being present at the party yourself. We’ve all been Martha.

This is true on a larger scale than just party throwing. We live in an age of anxiety. If we are not worried about something, we worry we should be worried about something, because, well, everyone is worried about something and if we are not, then there’s probably something wrong, so we start worrying about not worrying. We worry about money, we worry about family, we worry about work, we worry about our diet and exercise, we worry about the environment, we worry about the state of the world. The worries are endless. And that’s not to say there are not legitimate things to be concerned about. But the accumulation of them has a way

of creating a cloud that just sort of hangs over us, following us around, taking a lot of our time and energy, and preventing us from being the person we want to be.

And then there are all the distractions buzzing around us today. There are days, I'm sure you've had, when you get into bed and say, "Sheesh, what did I even do today?" From the moment you woke up it was one thing after another, none of it what you planned. Kids need this, work needs that, an email or phone call comes in that throws you off onto a whole project you didn't even plan to do. This is not even to mention the distractions we indulge in willingly—smartphones, TV, Pokémon Go. Like worry, a little bit of distraction can be healthy and good. But a life of distractions can keep us from being in control of our lives, of being the people we want to be.

If I were a self-help author, to remedy these worries and distractions, I might suggest some "me" time. And this is what's tricky about self-help books, there is a kernel of truth in there. If you never replenish yourself you will be drained by the various tasks of your life. Your worries and distractions will rule you and you will lose touch with your self. But the difference between a priest and a guru is where they tell you to go looking for that source of replenishment and identity. They might tell you to find it deep within yourself, perhaps by going to the spa, or taking a day at the beach. I'm telling you to find your self at the feet of Jesus Christ. Join Mary in kneeling before him and soaking up all that he has to teach you. There is nothing wrong intrinsically with the spa, or a day at the beach. But if you are looking only inwardly, to your own strength and resiliency, great though it may be, to alleviate the deep and pervasive worries and anxieties of your life, you will come up empty once again. Their fix is temporary. Finding a source of strength, and energy, and purpose from a relationship with Jesus, now that is something that cannot be taken away from you. That is the one thing you need. That is the thing that will calm all your worries, and block out all your distractions. That is where you will find your true self.

But how, exactly, to go about doing this? We do not have the benefit of hosting Jesus in our home. We cannot literally sit at his feet and soak up his words of wisdom. So what recourse do we have? Well we have prayer. Times of quiet where we ask Jesus to teach us, lead us, help us. We have worship, where we do come, as individuals and as a community, and kneel at the feet of our Lord to be nourished by him. And we have Scripture; the words and teachings of Jesus and his followers are recorded for our benefit if we avail ourselves of them.

But how many of us, given the worries and distractions of our lives, find replenishment and purpose in time of prayer and the reading of scripture each day? How many of us ground our life at the foot of Jesus, asking for the wisdom and guidance and the courage to know and to see who we are and what we are to do? How many come and kneel at our altar rail and beg Jesus to replenish our soul and sustain us for the week to come? Because that is how we access the one thing that cannot be taken away from us: a relationship with Jesus Christ.

If you want to take up any of these practices, but don't know how to get started, please come and talk to me or Fr. Tim, or Sr. Adele Marie. We want to help. Because even though you may not be the person you want to be, you can be the person God created you to be. And that's probably better than what you had in mind anyways. And God doesn't care how much you weigh, God doesn't care how big your house is, or how much money you have. God doesn't care about how well you are performing at work. All those things are superficial identities that cause you to worry and distract you from being who you really are. God did not make you to be perfect, but to be you, and to do your part in loving Him spreading His love in this world. If you spend time in study, and prayer and worship, you will find the Spirit of God working on your life, blocking out all your distractions and worries, giving you that greater part, the part that can teach you just who you are and can be. So come to Jesus in faith, open yourself up to him, give your attention, listen to his words, and you will find your true self there.