

“Finding Blessings in the Struggling Times”

Psalm 31

2 Corinthians 4: 8 – 10

October 8, 2017

Rev. Dalene Vasbinder

It was just last week, just seven days ago, when we gathered in celebration. World Communion Sunday; we sang uplifting songs, had colorful cloth draped over the table, tasted breads from all over the world! How very easy it was to reflect on ‘blessings’ in that atmosphere of joy! I was riding high on that wave of joy for the rest of the day. Less than 24 hours later, my wave came crashing down as tragic, horrific news from the shooting in Las Vegas began to fill the airways. ‘At least 20 dead – shot. Make that 30. Now up to 45. Resting now at 58’. As I sat to put together my notes for this sermon this week, the topic already planned as part of the five week series, I thought how very appropriate that today we are reflecting on finding blessings in the struggling times. For this week? Evil on display, emotions of sadness and despair and anger. Struggling times.

Today is week four of our five Sunday worship series on ‘Blessings’ as seen through the lens of ancient Celtic Christianity – blessings not as something special or favored or lucky but an understanding of blessings as all of life, the fullness of life. If we accept that premise, then we somehow have to come to terms with life’s shadows; the times of pain, grief...struggle...for that IS a part of the ‘all’ of life.

There is a heartrending scene in the movie from a couple of decades ago ‘Forrest Gump’. Jenny, the childhood girlfriend of the mentally challenged Forrest Gump, has come home from one of her many self-destructive prodigal wanderings. She and Forrest go to the abandoned house of her tragic childhood. The house had deteriorated. The roof had caved in. The front porch and steps had fallen down. As Jenny stood looking at the house, an overwhelming tide of all of the pain that she had experienced there; the loneliness, the poverty, the abuse from a drunken father, all of these memories of her struggle came rushing back and she loses it. She storms toward the house screaming and throwing things; her shoes, clods of dirt, and all the rocks she can find. When there are no more rocks to throw, she falls down exhausted and sobbing to the ground. Her friend Forrest moves lovingly toward her, and he lifts her up, he says: “Jenny, sometimes there are just not enough rocks.”

Have you ever been there? Overwhelmed by personal or societal demons, submerged in grief, left paralyzed by despair as life’s struggles, when it seems as if there aren’t enough rocks in the world to chase them away?

How is it possible to even consider ‘blessings’ in those times when there doesn’t seem to be enough rocks in the world to chase away the struggle in which we find ourselves?

First, it may be important to state clearly what the blessings we find in the midst of struggle is not – at least, is not a part of my theology or hope to leave with you. I do not believe that a God of love and goodness and justice ‘blesses us’ with pain or loss or illness or tragedy to teach us a

lesson or make us stronger which the phrases ‘God never gives us more than we can handle’ and ‘everything happens for a reason’ imply.

That being said, if we lean into God’s presence in the midst of struggle and pain, we do often come out on the other end with life lessons learned, and stronger for it. But there is a difference between God causing pain and suffering and God being with us, standing by our side in the midst of pain and suffering.

So, back to the original question; where do we find, how do we find blessing in the midst of those struggling times?

Paul’s words to the group of faithful gathered in Corinth certainly remind us that being faithful has no guarantee of a struggle free life. He writes of affliction, of being perplexed, persecuted, struck down. Not an easy life! But the struggle never has the last word; ‘we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.’ 2 Corinthians 4: 8 – 10

The context of Paul’s words are about leadership of the faithful at a time when people in the community are doubting his words and the words of those close to him, are calling his ministry and his professing of Jesus into question and persecuting him because of it. But for this time, especially for this time, may we hear the words in broader terms – for all of us, for those hanging on to faith, trying to understand and live by it, journeying in faith that often includes struggle.

Paul’s words remind us that we are never abandoned. That God never leaves us or forsakes us; that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Our faith story reminds us that even when we can’t see a way out, there will somehow be a way out if we hang on to trust in God, if we remember, even though we can’t see it now, that a light shines in the darkness and the darkness can never put it out.

A blessing during times of struggle can be faith itself; a lifeline that we grab onto when we’re sinking, a cane to lean on when we’re stumbling, a soft pillow to lay our heads when we need to just rest before we can carry on.

Perhaps ‘in the midst of’ the struggling times we can’t find blessing. For the perspective of blessing often comes after, not in the thick of the darkness. Although the realization may not lessen the grief at the moment, we know, don’t we, that to know grief is to know the blessing of love or, as Queen Elizabeth II put it, “Grief is the price we pay for love.”

This week words of blessing came across my computer screen. From the words, I was reminded that Jesus did not run from struggle, from pain or grief. In fact, just the opposite. We find our savior oftentimes in places of struggle, meeting people in their need, walking with them in their pain, not turning away from but entering into. And that to follow Jesus, we are to do the same and that as we do so, we are ‘blessed’. These words of blessing are written by Sister Ruth Fox, Order of St. Benedict, Sacred Heart Monastery, Richardton, ND:

May God bless you with discontent with easy answers, half truths, superficial relationships, so that you will live from deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, abuse, and exploitation of people, so that you will work for justice, equality, and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you will reach out your hand to comfort them and to change their pain to joy.

May God bless you with the foolishness to think you can make a difference in this world, so that you will do the things which others tell you cannot be done.

If you have the courage to accept these blessings, then God will also bless you with
happiness—because you will know that you have made life better for others.
inner peace—because you will have worked to secure an outer peace for others.

Finally, one more word about finding blessing in the struggling times.

Have you seen the giant sequoia redwood trees of Northern California? They are mammoth in size! Did you know, however, that their roots are relatively shallow for their huge size? The roots only go down about ten feet and they don't have a tap root to anchor them down. So how can a tree that is up to 275 feet tall and 25 feet in diameter with such shallow roots stand for decades, centuries, withstanding wind and flood without toppling over?

The interesting thing about the redwood tree is that their root system is intertwined with the other redwood trees, literally holding each other up. Beneath the surface of these humongous, tall, statuesque trees are roots like an army who have their arms interlocked, standing and supporting each other. They are preventing the adversaries of life, the struggles of life, from knocking each other down.

When I think of those times of struggle in my life, I realize that I could not have come through that struggle without the care of a faith community, holding me up with interlocking arms when I couldn't stand on my own, believing and witnessing to God's love and light in the world for me when I was lost in what to believe or not strong enough to live that for others. What a blessing the community of faith, the church all throughout the ages, has been in times of struggle. No, we don't always get it right. But those times when we stand firm and strong for others, sharing our light, sharing God's love, that is such a blessing for those who cannot stand on their own. Able to overcome the obstacles that are a part of life. Able to win struggles that sometimes beat us down.

This week I have been blessed with a song that Kathy Egner introduced to me and that we sang last week. It is a song of resurrection, reminding us that we are the Easter people, with a faith of hope and promise. The words helped me during the struggling time of this week.

“Goodness is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death. Victory is ours, victory is ours, Oh victory is ours, through him who loved us!”

May the words reside in our hearts as we sing together.