

Advent Invitation to *Blessing*

One day God and a man we'll call Gene, were walking down the road. Gene asked God: "God, what is the world like?" God replies, "I cannot talk when I am thirsty. If you could get me a drink of cool water, we could discuss what the world is like. There is a village nearby. Go and get me a drink."

Gene goes into the village and knocks at the door of the first house. A stunning young woman opens the door. His jaw drops, but he manages to say: "I need a glass of cool water." "Of course," the young woman says, smiling, "but it's noontime; would you care to stay for something to eat?" "I'm hungry," Gene says, looking over his shoulder, "and your offering of food is a great kindness."

He goes in, and the door closes behind him.... 30 years go by! Gene, who wanted to know what the world was like; and the young woman, who offered him lunch; have married and raised five children. He is a respected merchant and she is a well-thought-of member of the community.

One day a terrible storm comes off the ocean and threatens their lives. Gene cries out: "God, help me!" A voice from the midst of the storm says: "Where is my cup of cool water?"

+++++++

Spiritual traditions always warn people about getting so caught up in the world that we miss life and miss God, the source of life, in the process. The demands of everyday life can seem merciless...; there is always more to do and not enough time to do it. Somebody said that fitting words for her tombstone would be: "*It's always something!*"

The pressure of everyday activity for many of us is especially intense during the Christmas Season; already busy people become busier. We have to prepare for the Season which often means shopping till we drop, and more and more work. Unfortunately, this frantic preparation often puts people to sleep spiritually, rather than longing for the birthing of Christ in our hearts and world.... If we take a moment to pause in the midst of our hectic-ness, we may hear a voice crying out in the desert of our hearts, saying something like:

"How can I be so busy and so empty...?"

All of us, at one time or another have experienced our spirits being depleted or even defeated – what T.S. Eliot called: "Living and partly living..."

My guess is that the people attracted to John the Baptist – that strange, eccentric voice crying out in the desert – must have felt a bit empty too; a bit 'dis-eased;' thirsting for something more.... Somehow John the Baptist, of whom Jesus says: "Among those born of women, there is none greater;" this John the Baptist, as Sister Kathleen describes so powerfully in her homily last weekend, brought the people to the edge of the Jordan, to the edge of their hearts, and challenged them to take a look inside. What is going on in our hearts? our souls? our 'centers...'? What is the world really like? What are our lives' really like? How much is God really a part of our lives? "Where is my cup of cool water???"

+++++++

During the Advent Season, John the Baptist calls us to journey through the noise and confusion and angst of our exterior lives, to our hearts, where God will speak.

The heart is the *material pump* of the body, the *physical* muscle that keeps blood flowing and the body alive. In Biblical Theology, the heart becomes a metaphor for the *spiritual center* of the person. The heart is a space of consciousness where we are open to God and ready to act on that openness. It keeps our spiritual life flowing and keeps us spiritually alive.

- ✚ To say that the “heart is hard,” is to imply that a person is not in conscious contact with God and, consequently, does not act out of that awareness. There is no *flow*.
- ✚ To say “the heart is on fire,” is to imply that a person is in conscious contact with God and is acting, living out of that awareness. There is *flow*.

The heart is where the deepest contact with God and the deepest contact with the world is made.

+++++++

A sure question that those crowds must have asked John the Baptist – a question we might be asking today – is: “How do we get to the heart? How do we get in touch with the spiritual center of our beings?”

John the Baptist tells us: repentance is the path; repentance is the first step... and it’s painful. With a searing and unflinching honesty, we must enter the desert, enter into solitude – do some inner work, and face our darkness, fear or self-deceptions; face our demons, face the parts of ourselves that are false, superficial – driven by the superficial needs to be powerful, accepted, popular, rich, in control; striving for momentary pleasures, jealousies, envy, selfishness, whatever the stuff is in our lives that blocks the path to discovering our true-selves, our real-selves, the selves God created us to be.... The stuff that blocks the arteries our heart - our spiritual center.

It is only when we repent: turn away from the darkness, from the stuff that hardens our hearts, that our hearts can be *softened* and *focused* to see the light. It is only when we repent that we can embrace the healing, forgiving, merciful grace of Jesus – described in today’s Gospel as imaginative examples of restoration: something that was missing is found; something that was wounded is healed: sight, mobility, cleanliness, hearing, life, dignity, wholeness are returned.

By turning away from darkness and opening our hearts to the light, to the restorative grace of Jesus: we are reborn – made new – we become a little bit more the persons and people God created us to be: precious children of God, and brothers and sisters to one another.

Sisters and brothers, we know well that the process of repentance and rebirth is not a one-time experience, but a lifelong journey: progress not perfection – little by little, sometimes two steps forward and one step backward, we are becoming who God intends us to be. Very often, it is our mistakes, our weaknesses, our failures, our sins that are the fertile soil of spiritual growth and becoming, if we dare face them and “Let go and let God.”

Our Liturgical Calendar offers us the opportunity, year after year, to repent and turn towards the light. Advent and Christmas, for example, is not primarily a birthday party for Jesus – or, primarily, a time to look forward to His coming again the end of time – but once again, this Advent and Christmas is a time for us to repent and let Jesus be reborn in our hearts and in our church and in our world.

Monday evening, as we prepare for Christmas in our parish, we have an opportunity to come together as a community, an opportunity to make a commitment to repent, to turn away from the darkness and open our hearts to the light... by celebrating together the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and admitting that we're all sinners – without exception! In the interview with the Jesuit magazine America, soon after having been elected Pope, the first question put to Pope Francis was: "Who are you?" to which, after taking a moment to reflect, he responded "I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition; it is not a figure of speech or a literary genre. I am a sinner." So: we're in good company! Following our prayer, five priests will be available for individual confessions.

+++++

This past week, I spent a few days with the Benedictine Monks at the Westin Priory in Vermont. At morning prayer one day, one of the monks, Br. John, shared a reflection called "Blessing" written by John O'Donohue. Hearing it, I thought of our 'Namaste' blessing at the beginning of Mass, where we recognize the spark of the divine, the spark of God that is present in each of our hearts. When we pray 'Namaste' to one another, we're truly *blessing* one another – fanning that spark of the Divine within us and among us.

I'd like to share this Blessing reflection – because when all is said and done, *blessing* is what we're all about when we gather here in this place of prayer; and *blessing* is especially what we are all about when we together tomorrow evening for reconciliation:

Companions,
In the parched desert of our times,
a blessing can be like the discovery of a fresh well
of living water!
Each of us can bless.
A blessing changes the air, the atmosphere,
the parched land.

Something like fullness
flows into our hearts
from the invisible neighborhood
of loving kindness —
the *hesed*
of Hebrew Scriptures.

In the light of blessing
a person or situation becomes illuminated
in a completely new way.
In a dead wall a new window opens;
In dense darkness a path starts to glimmer,
And into a broken heart
healing falls morning dew.

(continued)

How ironic
that so often we continue to live like paupers
though our inheritance of spirit is so vast.
The quiet eternal
that dwells in our hearts
is silent and subtle;
In blessing,
the eternal emerges
to embrace and nurture us.

Whenever you give a blessing,
a blessing, *hesed*, God's loving kindness,
a taste of eternity —
returns to embrace you!*

Amen!

(* "*Blessing*" by John O'Donohue – adapted from *To Bless the Space Between Us. P. XV*)