

Living Life Anew, by Tim Hall

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C, 7 April 2018

[RCL:] Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

This week I had a couple of experiences that brought me right back around to our readings this morning, which I think are about change... giving up our old selves and putting on new garments, woven with the love of Christ, even in the face of suffering and certain death. We sang it in our beautiful Psalm this morning:

Those who sowed with tears

will reap with songs of joy.

Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed,

will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.

On Friday, Judy and I had workers in our house, finishing up on warranty work from our new home project, where we've been for almost a year now. One of the workers was a young man named Freddy, who we learned was originally from Honduras. We laugh when we talk about him as young, because, as we learned as we chatted with him, he is actually 44 years old, which is looking pretty young to Judy and me these days!

Freddy is right there in the prime of life, having bought a townhouse in Burke where he lives with his wife and three kids, an 18-year old son who is finishing his senior year at Lake Braddock High, a 14-year old son, and a 7-year old daughter. His wife has two more classes to complete her teaching certification. Freddy is the youngest of 7 children, some of whom are still in Honduras. Obviously he's working very hard to make a life for himself and his family here in the U.S., a country he loves.

As we spoke, Freddy began throwing in an occasional "Thank God" for this and "with God's help" for that, especially as he talked about his life and family in Honduras. As we opened up to each other about our faith, we learned that he was involved with a church in Reston with which he has been on a couple of mission trips to Central America, one to Columbia and another to Honduras, where, with the little bit of monies they could raise, they were doing what they could to provide relief to the poor and afflicted people there.

You could tell it really excited him to talk about his experiences working for Christ in our broken world. It was heartwarming and inspirational to us to see him living out his faith in such a deliberate way, especially when coming from such a humble and challenging earlier life. In the words of the Lord, spoken through Isaiah, "*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*"

As we parted, we gave each other hugs as we had moved on from our old employer-worker relationship to this new brotherhood in Christ. Before departing Freddy made sure that we knew his last name was "Cruz", Spanish for "cross" and that another part of his name could be

translated as “I love the...”. And such was our encounter with “Freddy I love the cross of Jesus”. How cool was this chance meeting?

On Friday night we visited a fairly new friend for a 95th birthday celebration. Nick Miller, after serving in World War II, had a career in the foreign service working for the State Department and the CIA in various capacities. He spent many years in South and Central America, especially Brazil, where he raised a family and came to know many Brazilians. Later, after his wife of many years had passed away, he married a younger Brazilian lady named Lillian, whom he had come to know over the years, and it is through her and working at the Carver Center that I came to know this family.

They are a caring and most interesting couple, with different life stories intertwined through their “later in life” marriage. Nick is about 20 years older than Lillian. Their home is a constant crossroads for neighbors, workers, helpers, and their extended family. They love to tell stories of their lives. Nick is dying. Yes, he’s staring death in the face, having returned from several extended stays in the hospital to in-home hospice care, managed by a Brazilian nurse who is living with the family. But his spirit remains amazingly optimistic.

As I’ve come to see in my 18 months getting to know and serving this family, everything Brazilian is done in a big way. You’ve seen the “Carnival” celebrations. Well, that’s how it was for this birthday party. Family and friends from far and wide had come to celebrate with Nick, perhaps their last chance to spend time with him. The singing around the lighted birthday cake was energetic and joyful, with clapping and laughing, and great-grandchildren helping Nick blow out the candles. He had to still the exuberance so that he could share his birthday candle wish with us... that all these lovely people would be back to help celebrate his next birthday.

And then he told us this story...

Three men were attending the funeral of a friend who had recently passed away. As they looked down at their old friend in the coffin, one asked the others what they hoped people would say at their funerals as they gazed at each of them, reposed in their coffins.

The first said, “I hope they will say, ‘He was a good man who loved his family and always tried to do his best for them’.” The second said, “Yes, that is what I would like them to say, too. And also that ‘he spent a successful career making the world a better place’.” And what about you, they asked the third. “I hope they say,” he responded, “Look! He’s moving!”

Apologies to Brother John, who told us last week that Lent is not the season for “risotherapy”, or telling jokes. But I thought this one was particularly apropos, given our Gospel reading this morning. You see, like Nick, Jesus is facing imminent death.

In chapter 11 of John’s Gospel, preceding today’s lesson, we read the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. And while the family rejoices and many believers are made that day, the chief priests and the Pharisees see this sign as yet another threat to their power, and “*from that day on they planned to put him to death.*” And they gave orders “that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.”

Jesus, knowing this, starts on his way to Jerusalem, but first, he stops in Bethany to visit his dearest friends. We don't know why Lazarus, Martha, and Mary had become his close friends, but we do know that their love for one another was great. And we also know that when we are in danger and in pain, we long for someone to sit with us, to accept us as we are, to comfort us by just being there; someone who will not argue by telling us all will be all right, but someone who will share in our apprehension, without words. Such was the friendship between Jesus and these three siblings.

We already know that they loved having him visit, with Martha anxious to feed him and Mary anxious to listen to him. In that previous meeting when the two sisters argued, his visit to them was for their sake. And when their brother had died, his coming to them was for all their sakes.

But now, a few days before his arrest and immense suffering, he comes to them for himself. He needs human companionship and human comfort. And they give it to him. The siblings don't know what is about to happen to him; they simply know that he needs to be near them.

Martha, as is her habit, does what she is used to doing: she feeds the people she loves.

"Martha served". Mary, as is her way, goes the extra mile. Food is not enough for her; only the most precious gift will do. In her symbolic act of pouring the costliest perfume on Jesus' feet, she honors him and reveals her deep love and gratitude, because he has indeed changed her life and made it worth living with his words and actions.

It's a lovely moment at that banquet of love. The whole house fills with an exquisite aroma of thanksgiving. A lovely moment spoiled with pettiness by the one who has stopped loving his teacher. Judas claims that beauty and gratitude are a useless extravagance when there are poor people around. Whether he truly cared about the poor or not does not matter here. What matters is Jesus' response: Leave her, he says.

When a heart is filled to overflowing, don't quench it. When a throat sings of love and praise, don't silence it, just because others are weeping. An expression of love that rises beyond the absolute necessities of life is acceptable, Jesus is telling them. This is a special occasion. He knows that he will not be seeing his friends again. He will carry with him the aroma of their love and devotion. As he stumbles with the cross on his back, the stink of the crowd, of blood and sweat and ugliness all around him, he will remember this moment of overwhelming gratitude. His earthly life has not been easy and comfortable. This dinner with friends, their laughter, Martha's good food, and Mary's gift of love are the last reminders of what is good in this earthly life. We are glad that he is being given this last gift among dear friends.

The suffering that is about to begin is the aberration. What is normal is life with all its good gifts: Love of family and friends, food for the body, and beauty with all its appeal to the senses. This story is a permission for us also to cherish these good gifts.

Martha, Mary, and Lazarus have all been changed by this man, Jesus. They have given up their old ways and are living life anew, because of his love for them... and their love for him. Soon the disciples, even Peter, will finally get it and they, too, will live life anew, spreading the

Gospel, this Good News taught by their teacher, “Rabboni”, through his words and actions, to their brethren and then to the four corners of the world.

And Saul, “a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church”, will be forever changed and become his most ardent follower after his encounter with the risen, glorified Christ on the road to Damascus. With his new name and his new life, Paul also knows about suffering. Imagine him sitting in a prison room somewhere in Rome. He has already talked so much about his Christ that even the praetorian guards know the name. Paul’s love for Christ is like that perfume of Mary’s... poured on the feet of Jesus. It is extravagant beyond knowing. He spends his time in his prison cell remembering those he loves and writing them letters.

Paul could have ignored the call and gone on to live a comfortable life. But the call of Christ was too strong... it could not be ignored. As he tells the church at Philippi, *the women and men he has loved for years*, “...whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish.”

It’s never too late for us to live life anew. To welcome Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. We, too, will be forever changed when we cherish the good gifts that God has bestowed on us and share this love of Christ, through our words and actions, with those around us, both near and far. We will be blessed when, In the words of Paul, we “press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

~ Amen

Note: Text in blue was taken from “Comfort in the Midst of Suffering”, written by Katerina Katsarka Whitley for Lent 5 (C) and found at [Sermons That Work](#).