

Sermon for Proper 25 (Year A) – October 29, 2023
Preached at Saint Aidan’s Episcopal Church, Portland, Oregon
Deut. 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; I Thess. 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-48

I think it was in the 1980’s when the national news carried the story of nine physically handicapped people who climbed to the top of Mount Rainier in Washington state. One of the mountain climbers had an artificial leg. Another was an epileptic. Two were deaf; and five were blind. Despite these handicaps, the nine were able to successfully negotiate the 14,000 foot climb and then to get back down again safely. I was living in Chicago at the time, but the story was in all the papers and covered on television.

When asked how they managed to perform this amazing feat, one of the blind members of the party said simply, “We had a lot of help from each other on the trip.” Similarly, the Gospel this morning tells us that there is no way in which we can successfully negotiate our life’s journey without a lot of help from one another. Since God has given each of us only some of the many gifts needed for a whole and healthy life, the reality is that we will never make it without working closely with one another.

Since the 1960’s we have seen an increased emphasis on individualism and a corresponding spiritual crisis in our society—a “loss of faith,” if you will. We are all witnesses of the inadequacy of a purely secular response to legitimate questions of faith. And I don’t think this spiritual

crisis is just another fad that will go away, but neither is it something totally new.

Our religious history as a people of God, from the time of Abraham to the time of Jesus, and from Jesus' time to our own time, is filled with reports of "spiritual crises" –both personal and societal. In fact, having a "crisis of faith" would seem to be a common flaw in the human condition. So in our own time we should remember that we are in good company, that the human quest for meaning and connection with God often comes in the midst of confusion and doubt.

Not only were the greatest saints and prophets of the Lord subject to these "spiritual crises," they were actually *noted* for them. Like us, they often handicapped themselves by limiting their search for God's presence to the safety and comfort of familiar surroundings. And when God did not appear according to their preconceived notion of how, and when, and where, they felt lost, alone, and abandoned—even bitter and resentful.

The Book of Job reveals the author as an intensely religious person caught up in the throes of one such "spiritual crisis." Job was a handicapped person: emotionally, spiritually and physically. In the midst of terrible suffering, he had lost contact with the just God he longed to see. The more he reflected on the problem of human suffering, the more the presence of a "just" God seemed hidden from view. Frustrated and dejected he wrote,

Should He come near me, I see Him not;

Should He pass by, I am not aware of Him.
Where then is my hope?

The prophet Jeremiah also has given us a vivid account of his “spiritual crisis.” Forced to endure many trials and sufferings as an unpopular preacher and unwanted reformer, Jeremiah emotionally confesses his doubts over whether God’s promised help will ever come. As his troubles multiply, the image of a just and loving God fades from view and Jeremiah laments,

I let myself be duped
The word of the Lord has brought me derision and
reproach

Cursed be the day on which I was born.

“Spiritual crisis” is a glib way of describing the profound religious experience of a person caught up in a seemingly unrewarding search for God. It is a profoundly spiritual experience because it takes us directly to the heart of questions about the value and meaning of life. Eat, sleep, work and play: “Is that *all* there is?” we ask. Or is there some deeper meaning and purpose to life? What can it be? By whose design? Under whose direction? Who or what will I call God? Where will I find the center of my existence?

If our current “spiritual crisis” means coming to terms with questions such as these, then we may count this handicap a blessing.

Because such a “spiritual crisis” can help us to discover that God’s apparent absence from our lives is not because God isn’t there; it’s because we’re looking in the wrong places. The prophet Elijah looked in vain for God in the mighty forces of wind, fire and earthquake. Only then did he discover God unexpectedly, in a still, small voice.

And we know that in Jesus of Nazareth the Word became flesh, *not* in the expected person of a triumphant king or rebel leader, but in the *un-*expected, scandalous form of one who taught the poor and disenfranchised, one who sat at table with sinners, one who was despised and rejected by the leaders of his own people, and ultimately was crucified on a trumped-up political charge.

Jesus is the supreme example of how God is revealed to us in unexpected ways. Jesus was an outcast; therefore we should not be surprised to discover his presence among the outcasts of our time. Jesus was a servant; therefore we should not be surprised to see signs of his presence among those who serve. Jesus was a member of an oppressed minority; therefore we should not be surprised to hear his voice in the concerns of those marginalized both here at home and throughout the world.

Do not look for me just in the sanctuaries, or in the precise words of theologians, or in the calm of the country side; look for me in the place where [people] are struggling for their very survival as human beings.

These are the words of Alan Paton in his book, *Cry The Beloved Country*.

Listen to how he continues:

See me in this house of worship, yes, but see me also in all the faces of your handicapped, flawed brothers and sisters. For my two great commandments are made one in the person of my Divine Son who now commands: “Love one another as I have loved you.” Do this in His name, and you will know me, your God! Do this and you will learn to believe in me!

Some of us feel unworthy of being love; others cannot give love. Some of us are burdened by guilt; others are filled with rage. Some of us are consumed by envy; others are driven by greed. Some of us have forfeited our self-respect; others never acquired it. Some of us are battered by fear; others are buffeted by frustration and failure. Some of us are imprisoned by selfishness; others are enslaved by alcohol or drugs. Some of us carry within the gray ash of burned-out dreams; others are haunted by fractured hopes and unfulfilled promises. Some of us are convinced of our own worthlessness; others are persuaded that life is meaningless.

No one has it all together. None of us can climb the mountain alone. So even though most of us have our senses intact, even though we have the use of all our limbs, even though we are not suffering from some physical illness—nevertheless, each and every one of us is a flawed, handicapped human being. That is the human reality.

Still, Jesus commands us, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And I am convinced that we can only be concerned for our neighbor, or have

empathy for our neighbor, or truly understand our neighbor, *when and if* we see that our neighbor, like ourselves, is a flawed, handicapped human being who cannot make it alone. The story of those nine handicapped climbers who together reached the summit of Mount Rainier is a paradigm for our own journey through life. Their struggle and triumph merely show us what is possible. I wonder if each of us at the end of our journey will be able to say, “We had a lot of help from each other along the way.”