

Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm 149
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

September 10, 2017

Quite a few years ago when I was in the discernment process learning about my call to the priesthood, I clearly remember what I would have described as having had to “jump through many hoops” before I made it to the next subsequent step in the process. And while the process was fairly long – for me it was about five years – it was about the right amount of time required to shape and reshape me as I moved closer to my eventual ordination. But one of the biggest steps – or biggest hoops I had to jump - was to enroll in and fully enter into seminary life.

Some of you know that I attended the General Theological Seminary located in lower mid-town Manhattan. Now, in terms of location, General is smack dab in the hustle and bustle of New York City. When I first toured General back in the spring of 2005, I was more than a little overwhelmed about the prospects of being in the Big Apple, let alone embracing the thought that I could be literally living there for three full academic years. But shortly after the required graduate school exams were completed and the application to seminary was submitted, I soon found out that I’d be living on the corner of 9th Avenue and 20th Street in what was known as ‘The Close’ on General Theological Seminary’s campus in a corner of New York City known as Chelsea .

Now, I have always recognized and admitted that I am somewhat naïve and I still believe that is true even today. You may disagree, but I know how truly naïve I can be. As I prepared to move to General and began living among a community of seminarians, I thought that finally, this would be a place of spiritual quiet and harmonious relationships that would foster my own spiritual growth into a kinder, gentler Christian human being. Man, was I ever wrong! Now seminary was great in all that I learned and in some of the relationships that I fostered, but I also learned very quickly that even seminarians – maybe especially seminarians – can be difficult to live with, to study with, to do chapel with, to have dinner with and to compete with, all in a monastic seminary environment. And you heard me correctly when I used the word compete. For there was a lot of academic competition that really didn’t help to facilitate a harmonious communal life. What we all came to realize is that no one – not even seminarians in training – are exempt from the human relationship challenges that go hand in hand with eating,

breathing, praying, and studying with 35 fellow human beings who are with each other day in and day out. Living in community with a bunch of academics brought about a challenge of communal living that I never thought I would experience.

And yet, at the end of the day, we realized we are all unique individuals. We are all quirky people and we all tend to get on one another's nerves; especially when living in such close proximity in any kind of community. Human beings, I believe, are hard wired to be in relationship with and in community with other human beings. But humans are complicated animals and all of the baggage that each of us carries can be fuel for the fire when it comes to living in community whether it be a spiritual community, a church community, an academic community, or even a community that comprises one's family of origin.

How do we learn to live well with others in community? Frequently, that is the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question that goes unanswered because often times it seems that we fail to get living with one another right. This morning's scriptures offer some wise advice when it comes to living well with one another and they offer some really practical advice. So, I want to take a few minutes to share with you my impression of the central nuggets of wisdom that are integral within each of the passages assigned for today. And after we breeze through that insight, I want to share with you the real-life story of a sanctuary community that is located right here in central Vermont, tucked away in the country shire town of Chelsea.

(Exodus 12:1-14) In the first reading from the Old Testament and the Book of Exodus, we are up close and personal with the ancient Israelites who celebrated together in community the festival of the Passover. From a contextual standpoint, it is important for us to remember that this story – this oral tradition - was told over and over throughout the centuries, so that its core message would be a constant reminder to the people of Israel that God stood with them in their darkest hour. It is also important to understand that God did not willfully smite the first born Egyptian children and animals as a way to free the Israelites from captivity. But instead, this is a part of the lore and tradition that was passed down from generation to generation of faithful Jews who wanted to ensure that their children and their children's children would know that God was present and active in the liberation of their ancestors. The bigger and more significant part of the Passover story and celebration is this: That by participating in the Passover rituals and celebrations, the Israelites as a community set themselves apart as

holy in the following ways. The sacrifice of the animal was meant to atone for the sin of the people. The blood from the sacrificial animal smeared on the door and the lintel above the door symbolically purified those persons within. And the eating of the sacrificial meat symbolically consecrated those who consumed it. By participating in the Passover traditions and rituals the ancient Israelite people sanctified themselves as a communal nation holy to God.

(Romans 13:8-14) In the second reading, we hear some real specific suggestions as how we might live together harmoniously when living in community. Paul suggests that loving our neighbors as ourselves is in essence a fulfillment of all the commandments. When we put on the armor of Jesus' light and engage in right actions as practiced in our own lives and relationships, then we are living rightly and honoring God's desire for each of us to honor and respect the dignity of every human being. For Paul, there was a real sense of urgency to live honorably and respectfully both with ourselves and with one another. He almost suggests that because we have no idea what the future may bring or the timeframe that will bring it, that now is the time to make changes in our relationships because you never know what the future will bring.

(Matthew 18:15-20) And finally, we have today's gospel passage from Matthew. When we look at this teaching from a "balcony perspective" looking down at the big picture, Jesus, I believe, is encouraging each of us who is part of a faith community to treat each other with respect, even when we have been slighted or hurt by another person's words or actions. In other words, Jesus says, when some may go low, we must go high, but of course that is much easier said than done. Jesus suggests that whenever we've been hurt by a person with whom we are in relationship, we take the high road when we try to set our emotions aside as we also consider how the other person might have been wounded, too. It is when we look beyond our selves and our own hurts toward those of another, that we just might be able to build a compassionate bridge toward our loved ones by healing the relationship wound.

And at the heart of all three of these scriptural passages is God's promise and Jesus' promise that whenever two or three are gathered in God's name, that God (and Christ) will be present, assisting and facilitating new opportunities for renewal and resurrection even in the midst of broken relationships.

And this now brings me to the sanctuary community I want to tell you about this morning: the community of Brookhaven Treatment and Learning Center that is located on 122 acres in the little town of Chelsea, Vermont. Since 1952, Brookhaven has been a mission of the Episcopal Church in Vermont, serving Christ and compassionately treating boys from across Vermont who need individual compassionate care often following a life of significant trauma. The following is Brookhaven's mission statement taken from their web site:

Brookhaven Treatment and Learning Center provides individualized educational, residential, and clinical services to male youths ages 6-13 who have experienced abuse and neglect and present with significant emotional and behavioral challenges. Brookhaven is committed to providing our youths with a therapeutic environment that promotes safety, structure, and the opportunity to heal and transition back into the community and family.

I am honored to serve on the Board of Trustees for Brookhaven and I feel passionate about what Brookhaven does. At the end of every month, the Board of Trustees meets in Chelsea to hear from the Executive Director, Dr. Tony Iazzo, about how community life at Brookhaven has changed in the previous month. We hear how things look financially but we also hear about where admissions numbers are and what young boys may have recently come to Brookhaven. For better or for worse, we also hear the stories of why these boys have been removed from their homes and why they are now in the sanctuary community that is Brookhaven.

Some children are removed from their homes because of chronic drug usage by parents or guardians. Some children are the victims of sexual predators who are frequently closest to them whether they be relatives or step-relatives. Some are physically punished and abused like one little boy who spent over twenty-four hours locked in a garbage dumpster out in the cold. Another little boy has been at Brookhaven for three and a half years now because he has no family left, as both parents died from drug abuse. The stories are heartbreaking and I feel myself on the verge of tears every time we hear another story. And yet, it is "Dr. Tony" as the kids call him, who is intensely passionate and compassionate about providing these boys with a place to heal and learn to trust again and that is why I want you to know about Brookhaven.

I asked Tony to come to Montpelier to tell us about Brookhaven and its ministry, but Tony felt (incorrectly) that you would listen to me more than you would want to listen to him. He is an incredibly intense person in the best sense of the word. He cares deeply for these children and he has hand-picked a staff of teachers and counselors that also care deeply and lovingly for these young kids who need to learn to trust adults again. As board members, one of the perks we enjoy is being invited to Christmas and to end of the year celebrations. At these events, we learn what the boys have been studying. We get to hear them read aloud and tell us stories. We get to go into their classrooms and sit with them on the floor as they minister to us, sharing their joys, their frustrations, and their accomplishments. This past June at the end of the year celebration, we spent a fun evening enjoying the accomplishments of these boys. Once again, we were able to see and hear from the boys in their own words. One little boy in particular was so excited about being able to be reunited with his father that during the closing ceremony, he threw himself into his father's arms and the two cried tears of joy. That was one happy ending and there was lots of celebratory applause from the audience. Sadly, other stories endings are no so happy.

I wanted you to know about this important community that is doing God's work just over the mountain in Chelsea, VT. Brookhaven is a tiny school and center that is at full capacity when there are 8 residential students and 10 day students enrolled. Eighteen boys in all. Dr. Tony tells us that he is seeing a trend where some of the children who come to Brookhaven are even more broken now than they have ever been. Whether it is due to the opiate epidemic, extreme poverty, the stresses of life, or whatever else may be impacting these families, these boys need loving attention and they certainly get it at Brookhaven. And yet Brookhaven is only a dot on the radar. A tiny school that does make a difference but the need for children everywhere is far greater than even you or I may know. I didn't tell you these stories as a ploy to ask for your donations. I told you about Brookhaven because this is one sacred community where young broken souls come to heal and to become whole and it touches my heart deeply every time I am there.

As I think back to my discernment process and the time just before I entered seminary, I remember one particularly sleepless night when I was lamenting the fact that I would soon have to be away from my two sons. That was hard for me because my sons were and are the lights of my life. I don't know why, but I truly

remember while I was praying about that worry, that something or someone told me not to worry. And the message that I felt in my heart was that I would always have the gift of children around me throughout my life. So far, that has proven to be true and for that, I thank our God who constantly surrounds us. God is good. God can make miracles happen even in the darkest of times. And God is with us in all of our human communities, no matter how they are shaped or what they look like. And for that truth and for God's healing and miraculous presence among us, I am truly and humbly grateful.

Amen.