

"Mixed Blessings"

Psalm 143

I was browsing through my bookcase the other day and a title caught my eye. It is the title of a book of sermons by Barbara Brown Taylor, "Mixed Blessings. I looked at the title and thought to myself, "Boy does that ever describe the times we find ourselves living in at this moment." The isolation and the fear that we have all lived under for the last few weeks has been getting our household down and I suspect it has yours also.

Nope can't shake that hand. This elbow bump business instead of a good hug is so unfulfilling. We have neighbors who can't even visit their dying loved ones in hospice care in local nursing homes because no visitors are allowed under any circumstance. And this morning a friend whose wife is physician in a local hospital texted me that his wife is working in a hospital with four patients who have been intubated and she has been given a mask that she must wear all week. (She has been given a brown bag to keep it in). Another friend's husband needs by-pass surgery that cannot be done at this time, so they are quarantined at home until he can have his surgery. I fear for the survival of our favorite restaurants and their staff. And the bad news goes on and on. So many are now out of work and I know from experiences that no one can really afford to lose his or her lively hood. And the spiral down continues.

The Psalmist is crying for protection from his enemy that "pursues me, he crushes me to the ground; he makes me to dwell in darkness like those that are long dead." His enemy is seen and our enemy at the moment is unseen and that makes it even more frightening for all of us.

But in the midst of the darkness, there are real blessings if we will but see them.

My former boss surprises me with a call to just make sure that my wife and I are ok and to thank me again for all the years of hard work that I put in for him and his family.

Our yard is filled with flowers blooming and birdsong and more importantly – butterflies. We head to the nursery to buy more butterfly plant (milkweed) not because we need to spend the money on them but because it makes us happy to watch the process of hungry caterpillars eating and devouring the plants, forming their beautiful chrysalises, hatching, drying their wings, and flying all round our yard and our heads and the neighborhood. We walk in the evenings with our neighbor – keeping our appropriate distance from each other. And as we walk, we listen to birdsong. We view the beautiful chalk paintings on sidewalks in front of houses. We meet and speak to so many others in the neighborhood who are out doing the same thing. With so many more out walking now it doesn't seem so isolating.

We cannot meet for choir practice or Sunday morning worship or any other church activity, but watching the videos and reading the readings for the day and especially watching Laura give her time for children and her homily from her office, I feel connected to my church family in a very real way that I did not think was possible. These are all Blessings.

So, in this time stress, I like what Barbara Brown Taylor says, that we need “to learn to give thanks for the mixed blessings to say ‘thank you’ for the whole mess, the things we welcome as well as the thing we would risk our souls to escape.”

After our scripture reading each Sunday, the reader says: “These are our sacred stories.” And we all respond, “Thanks be to God.” I like to think that we say those words because it is a way for us to express our belief that no matter what comes along or how dark our path is at times -- God’s love is always there with us. May we like the Psalmist, honestly say:

*“Show me the way I should go,
for to you I lift up my soul.
Rescue me from my enemies, Oh Lord
for I hide myself in you.
Teach me to do your will,
for you are my God;
may your good Spirit
lead me on level ground.”*

So, in this very stressful time, let’s remember that there is truly no place in our lives that God is not with us. Let’s be on the lookout for God and the little unexpected “mixed blessings” we encounter as we travel along our paths in the coming days.

- Robert Carter