

Sermon, July 15, 2018

People are always asking me if it's tough or depressing having to deal with death and funerals on such a regular basis. Of course there's an element of sadness, people are often grieving...no one likes to lose someone close...but for me, honestly, it's a privilege to be with families during difficult times. I don't show up with a pocket full of platitudes or answers to deep theological questions, I'm not trying to solve problems, necessarily, I just get to be with people, when they need it most.

The other thing about funerals, is that I get to know - by way of the conversations I have with families and listening to the remembrances - I get to know about the lives of amazing people. One such example happened late last month, at the funeral for Franny Elder, one of the matriarchs of St. John's...

She was a lifelong naturalist... she worked tirelessly for the environment, wilderness protection and green living. Her daughter Sarah shared a story about her mother insisting that she stop and listen, "Do you hear that, Sarah?" Franny asked during a walk in the woods, "That's the sound of the circadian rhythm."

I was blown away, what a thing to share with a young person, Franny was BlueGreen Theology before there was BlueGreen Theology!

When I first got to know Franny, three years ago (when conversations were easier), she told me how her husband had been a proponent for low-cost housing, especially for the elderly. As president of Phipps Housing he helped lead the building of nearly 13,000 apartments for those with moderate income in Manhattan and the South Bronx.

Both Franny and her husband were advocates for causes that are so worthwhile and even radical. And I say radical, not as surfer slang, or as some marker of progressivism, but Franny and Duncan were radical because their advocacy was rooted, that's where the word radical comes from, radix, root, like the radish

Franny and Duncan were radical because their advocacy hit at the root of important issues and was rooted in the virtues espoused in their faith.

So at a funeral, of all places, I managed to find deep inspiration in the lives of unique people, who, really, I barely knew. I was inspired, filled with the spirit, because I realized... that even if the causes worth advocating for outlive the advocates, it is absolutely necessary to carry on advocating.

Advocates are often outlived by the visions they advocate for, but that doesn't stop them.

On the Fourth of July there's a tradition, well over 60 years old, of a parade that marches around a block in Lloyd Harbor. It's just people, gathering and walking and listening to one another. There are a number of elements of this parade that return year after year and one that I love is that a number of women wear sashes from the suffragette movement. "Votes for women" they say.

Of course women have the right to vote now, but, the point is that in many ways the playing field is still not level.

There's plenty more to do for the sake of equality between men and women, but that same thought didn't stop women of the early 20th century from fighting for their right to vote, for the 19th amendment. And that very same thought, that there's more to do, didn't stop Deb Solbert and her granddaughter from wearing those sashes a week and a half ago.

In fact that's the very reason they still wear those sashes: there's more to do.

Martin Luther King Jr.! An obvious example of someone who advocated for a cause that, today, begs us to wake up and recognize the disparity and bigotry that plagues humanity and its institutions. He had hope, he inspired hope, he had a dream and he wanted to see it fulfilled in his lifetime, but the thought that his dream might be so distant, extending even beyond where we stand today, did not stop him.

I think of John the Baptist as the quintessential advocate. The Patron Saint of advocacy. And his cause was the Kingdom of God, made real and present in his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah.

As a vision God's kingdom appears to the author of the Book of Revelations:

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

This vision resonates from the very first page to the very last page of the Bible and it pictures, as Franciscan Richard Rohr writes, a world made whole, with people living in beloved community, where no one is despised or forgotten, peace reigns, and the goodness of God's creation is treasured and protected as a gift.

For John the Baptist, his advocacy for such a place and time as this took the form of preaching, of exhorting people to live a life worthy of the Kingdom of God, poetically described in Revelations and pragmatically described by Rohr.

John the Baptist knew that a crucial facet to crystallizing this vision was an inner transformation, in each of us, that begins with recognizing our sins and changing our behavior. Change the body, and the mind and heart will follow. The transformation of the outer landscape cannot happen apart from the transformation of the inner landscape.

John the Baptist was the best kind of advocate, you know, because he really practiced what he preached. Don't go rolling your eyes at the dread locks, animal hides and bug eating, he was the real deal! Authentic! And we know this, we know this because Herod was afraid of him.

Powerful, violent, and as unpredictable as history portrays him (he's featured in sources other than the Bible) Herod knew John was holy and righteous and he protected him. Even when John railed against him, doing what prophets do: calling out leaders whose corrupt lives are like vectors; whose corrupt lives give permission to their minions to model despicable behavior...

Even then, Herod perplexed as he was, feared and protected John.

But daggone if he didn't corner himself at that party. There's more than a little irony in that John the Baptist's execution rests on Herod's upholding the integrity of his word. It's poignant, to say the least.

John the Baptist was outlived by the vision he was advocating for. Outlived by the dream he shared with the one true God. Where the outer world will reflect the inner peace that comes through knowing that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life.

John didn't see Jesus' healing miracles, he wasn't at the last supper, he didn't see the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ...but that didn't stop him from proclaiming the Kingdom that was inherent in Jesus Christ. That same kingdom which is in you and I and, through the mystery of God's grace, present in this meal we share in common.

You and I must also become advocates for the Kingdom of God made known in Jesus. Listen, again, to the words Paul wrote to the Church in Ephesus:

"With all wisdom and insight [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

It may seem that the fullness of time exists far beyond our mortal lives, it may look as though the Kingdom of God is a distant land, but don't let that stop you. The Kingdom of God is not a lost cause it is at hand.

And everything we do can be an act of advocacy on its behalf. A regular period of quiet prayer or a moment of eye contact with a stranger. From reading the Bible to writing a check. From calling a friend to calling out racism and sexism.

Even picking up litter, the 17th century monastic Br. Lawrence said "It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God."

If all we do is rooted in the love of God, rooted in the faith that has been handed down to us, it is a radical act of advocacy for the Kingdom of God inside and outside. So may we go forth this morning, strengthened by God's grace and removed from all fear, to advocate on behalf of God's kingdom. I know we can find a way.