

June 23, 2024

Pr. Steve

Texts: 2 Corinthians 1: 1-11; Mark 7:31-35

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This has become a rather intense season—these last weeks or two months—with so many of our friends just here at Peace suffering, ill, in hospital—really heavy. And, of course, there are friends and loved ones of yours beyond our immediate community—very, very intense.

Howard, receiving a terminal diagnosis. We really don't know what to do with that. It's hard to believe. And he is so grateful for all of your prayers, and thoughts, and love. Howard feels it. It's remarkable.

And Ken, just come out of 24 days in the hospital—with intense suffering—not even sure if they finally diagnosed what's wrong.

And Lois—losing one of the mothers of our church—such a loss, such a loss. I received this from her family—this little plate which you'll appreciate close up—just a reminder of the healing of which we are all in need. And there are so many other people, hurting, suffering, and I'll name all of those related to Peace later.

Jesus was a whole-maker. The Scriptures say it so clearly, but so often we go on ignoring it. *I did not come to condemn the world, but to make people whole again.* [based on John 3: 17] Whole within ourselves, whole in our relationships, in the community, and yes, also in the social order. It's all about the wholeness, especially in this time of fragmentation and division where we are at a loss. But wholeness is not just for those who are ill or suffering. It is for all of us, including those of us who are basically doing okay. There's more. To be healed into wholeness is to be healed into that vitality that gives us that deep down assurance that life can be good, and that everything is being turned towards the wholeness of God's compassion.

We are a praying congregation. This is not to be taken for granted. And it is the prayers, and healing prayers, over the years that becomes the foundation for the vitality and creativity of all that goes on here. There have been people who [have] walked just from the Gathering Hall, taken two steps inside of the Sanctuary, and go, *'Whoa! What is happening here—in this space?'* Two artists, a professor from Barnard teaching poetry, and a teacher at Princeton, teaching theater and music, here for a memorial service recently, said to me afterwards, because they contributed to the service, *'What is happening here? This place compels one's best. You have to give it up, because the Spirit is so thick here.'*

And yet, nobody here feels really good at prayer, right? In all my years, I've never had a member of Peace come to me to say, *'I think I've got prayer figured out now. Do you want me to teach it to the rest? I know they haven't got it yet.'* Nobody's ever said that to me. And that's perfectly fine, because we all feel awkward at prayer, *'it's sort of strange and I don't really know what's going on, and I'm not good at this, and I sure don't want to embarrass God'*, right?

Prayer is always unsatisfactory, always, for a lifetime. What matters is the connection, the connection of the heart even when we feel like *'I don't know what to say.'*

Wonderful. That's the prayer. What is that genuine experience which you are having?

"I'm brokenhearted for my friends. I have nothing to do. I feel stripped of myself—weak, vulnerable." Perfect prayer. Perfect, because it is the honest expression of where we are in God's presence. Nothing more needs to be said. Remember that text a couple weeks ago (May 19): *'In our sighs and groans too deep for naming, the Spirit takes those prayers and presents them to the Holy One, who knows what to do with them.'* [Romans 8: 26-27]

Nobody masters prayer. That's not the intention, but it brings us to a clarity, and this time has really made it clear when sometimes all we can do is stand at the foot of the Cross and gaze on the Crucified one—the One who suffers with us, not some God in the heavens who tosses out options from a rule book—*'Why don't you try..?'* No, the One who's in it with us, and who from time to time turns that experience into resurrecting love. We don't know how—but our hearts can be turned and renewed for what we need in this present time.

Axios. Do you remember when I shared that a couple of months ago, the Greek word, *Axios*, you are worthy! Bev and I heard that at the conclusion of our son's—he'd had some training as a lector in the Orthodox Church up in Missoula—and at the end of that, the whole congregation cheers one on *'Axios, Axios, you are worthy!'* It takes the breath away.

Father Tom Hand, (a Jesuit priest in Japan for 29 years), who's the one who brought us the singing bowl, years ago when he was back there. Father Tom and I talked a couple of times. And there is one thing, one thing, that just made him so angry. And it's that part in the Catholic Mass, a prayer right before communion, the Eucharist itself, when the community prays, *'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you. Only say the word and I shall be healed.'* And it made Father Tom angry because he said, *'That violates everything in the work of Christ who has made us worthy.'* Because, you see, that's the one thing we can never convince ourselves of. I want you to have positive confidence in life, and engage it, but down deep none of us ever buy it—that we're actually okay, right? Down deep, press the cause? Every one of us can turn somebody next to him into misery. *'You're not pretending to actually be religious, are you, Steve?'* The can of worms comes flying out.

But the work of Christ is that down deep, underneath everything, affirmation from God that you are worthy. *'She is worthy. He is worthy. She is worthy. He is worthy.'* We can barely take it in, can we? *'That's a really nice sentiment.'* Can we take it in? It's important, because everything pivots on that.

So—if you would, help me out. Can you turn to somebody in proximity to you, gently, with immense tenderness and kindness. You're not going to hurt them, nor are they going to hurt you. But the truth is, friends, it's not enough to say this inside of our own heads. It isn't. We need to hear it from others, we do, before we will believe it. So, find somebody, and if you're in a threesome, help yourself. You got to connect. Just identify who's the person you're going to be looking at, got it? Okay, now you can look away—pressures off. Okay, with immense compassion, just turn back to this person, and repeat after me. Here we go. Just repeat this. *"Axios, Axios—you are worthy. You are worthy of God's love, and belonging, and peace."*

Amen.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ.
Axios.