

Dec. 17, 2023

Pr. Steve

Texts:

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

That's the way the text should be translated—who is John the Baptist? The one who thunders in the desert? See how our language has diminished, so often, the profound intentions of the Scripture.

Tomorrow is my ordination anniversary, so I'm always a bit mindful of:

'What have the years accrued?

Have we come to live in peace with each other?

Am I joyful, praying constantly, thankful in most things...and not stifling the Spirit, the thunderer?'

So I'm going to share with you a few highlights over the years, and you get to decide how we're doing.

I was called by an inner city church in St. Louis, called Holy Comforter, a ghetto church near the projects, who was on total subsidy from the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod—and they decided to call me to come to the West Coast to do 'Arts and Justice Ministry'.

One of the members of the congregation—now this was up for major debate because they knew their subsidy could be yanked—one woman said, (matriarch of the congregation), *'If we don't call this man, we aren't a church. We may as well shut the doors and walk out!'* How's that for thunder? They voted to call me—had a great ordination celebration—two years later they were shut down.

Of course, the Seminary I went to [Concordia] was also shut down—and the Preparatory theological school I attended, [] where my father taught, (ranked on a par with Harvard), was also shut down, decimated, destroyed. Friends, 50 years ago I learned what Fundamentalism is all about. I've carried it all these years. That's how it works: you get in the tank and drive over people. Whew! However, the folks have remained supportive throughout these years as that congregation got scattered.

Early in my ministry years, Bev made for me this banner that says '*Ruach*' on it. That's the Hebrew word for Spirit. Do not stifle the *Ruach*—it's got to keep flowing, without that there is no Church. So, I did a variety of Arts and Justice ministries around the country, from Miami to Chicago, to LA, and in Denver. It was profound and enlightening, but in time I came to take a parish call here in Danville.

One of the early things we did was host Fr. Roy Bourgeois, who was a Catholic priest, and he was working to close the School of Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia. (Fort Benning is where they trained 75% of the dictators and death squad leaders throughout the whole of Central America.) Neither of our Catholic parishes would host Fr. Roy Bourgeois. *'Too dangerous, too much spirit. You can't say things like that!'* We hosted him. Yeah, I'm glad we did. I'm glad we did.

Another person we hosted was Dr. René Girard, a member the French Academy, the world's foremost scholar on scapegoating. (Hasn't this become a full-time occupation in this country—how to scapegoat other people?) Whoa—chilling. We hosted him 20 years ago, profound insightful scholar, wisdom practitioner—and for him, our Scriptures are all about Scapegoating.

It's part of the antagonism towards the Jewish community—is that it was the first religion to expose scapegoating—first on the planet. And the counter to that [scapegoating] are these verses of invitation to strangers, outsiders, foreigners. All shall be welcome to the Temple.

What we have inherited in interfaith affirmation of people in all traditions began in Judaism when the Temple was opened to all. Can you sense any kind of offensiveness in that? The Gospel always brings us to that point of clash. *'You can't really do that. You're not allowed to do that. Keep those people out of here, right? God has standards and we're here to exclude those who shouldn't be part of us.'* It's so tempting though, isn't it? And we, ourselves, go on with it as well, don't we?

I know at Peace you're supposed to put up with everybody. But, oh well—yeah, yeah, it still irritates.

I was tickled with the installation of our Bishop [Jeff Johnson] last week. There was a marvelous celebration, hundreds of people But I also had to chuckle on the inside because, you know, it was 30 years ago when about 30 Lutheran clergy illegally ordained the person who's our Bishop now. And there was furor across this [Lutheran] church body. *'You can't do that.'* And we did.

One of the finest moments was—we had invited Dr. Krister Stendhal, who was a profound (he's now passed) Swedish theologian. He taught at Yale and Harvard, and was also the bishop of the Swedish church for many, many years. And we'd invited him. (I suggested that he come be our guest speaker.) Unfortunately, he couldn't make it.

Jeff Johnson asked me what should we do about this? I said, 'You know what—let's have him write the New Testament epistle for the day—which he did —'To the Church on the reality of gay people in a Christian community in this time'. Oh elegant. Gospel-oriented, opening the doors

Do not stifle the Spirit.

After that great celebration with 1,000 people at St. Paul's in San Francisco, it was that epistle which kept circulating throughout the larger Church, which offended all of the other 64 Lutheran bishops. *'You can't say that. He's [Krister Stendhal's] not one of us. He has no right to speak to us.'*

Do not stifle the Spirit.

I'm really proud of that irritation. I am, and that people of Peace—a dozen of us—attended that celebration. There were people at Peace [Lutheran Church] ready to proclaim that at that time 30 years ago. God's been good to us, huh. with opportunities .

Well, in addition to opposing Islamophobia and anti-Semitism on numerous occasions, and working with the school board's to include gay students. This was the first congregation in our Valley to publicly have an AIDS Ministry. First one and it was dangerous people back in the early 90s. Oh people didn't want to hear it. Didn't want to hear it.

And I'm thankful. that the Arts have continued to flourish all along the way—from Gary's good work, so many people over the years, I flexibility to creating opportunities—Elizabeth [Hunter Ashley] bringing us the Messiah, so many other gifts. Jazz hasn't done too badly, you know, 19 years ! [We] kind of get used to it after a while. Amazing. Amazing. Oh yeah, and the Yale choir is coming soon. I hope you come, friends. Have we been blessed or what? Because these [events] are [Peace] community owned and sponsored. It's your hearts that have allowed this to happen. Preachers can't do this on their own, uh-uh. With no support, it just plain doesn't happen.

Be at peace. Always be joyful.

What an invitation, huh? That's the Scripture. We always struggle with 'be joyful'. *'Come on, you know the kind of week I just had.'* Yes, of course, we object. The Spirit knows that it needs to deepen the work among us, but that can only happen when our hearts are open to becoming soulful people.

You see the works of war, the works of hate, the works of fundamentalism don't need anything to keep going. It's just like a machine— you set it in motion, uh, you know, the Transformer robots and... We just love those movies, don't we? Why can't I be like that?

No, soulfulness is what sustains spiritual community. The down-deep willingness to be open to the Spirit who can recreate us in love. I wish I had solutions for all the problems we've got today, and a strategic plan that would work. But I don't. I don't.

I do know that when people of faith respond from the love in their hearts, that this is how the Spirit is working with us to transform life in small ways, great ways. *We will be surprised.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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