

MEGAN MCKENNA'S TALK FOR MADRID



“La ansiosa espera de la Creacion” (Romans 8:19 ff): VISION PARA LA MISION

INTRODUCTION

“Letters mingle souls, for thus friends absent speak.”
John Donne (from “To Sir Henry Wotton” 1598)

For many of us in the 21st century, the experience of actually receiving a letter is a very personal, even intimate one. It is becoming a very rare thing with all the electronic media and technology for communication available at our fingertips. Yet, for the past centuries, the act of letter writing was primarily reserved for correspondence between two people. It was often kept private, even on occasion kept secret from others. What was shared in a letter, especially those hand-written was only shared in bits and pieces, or with others who were trusted and lived on the edge of a relationship with one or the other writer. It was a place to share happenings, daily and mundane as well as reflections and recollections, comments

on political and economic realities and often meditations on one's innermost thoughts, dreams, failures and longings. It was a place for poetry, philosophy, theology and talk of God, prayer and spirituality, questioning and searching for a vocabulary to express the deepest longings of life that also wanted to be shared as gift with another: a friend, a lover, a family member.

We have been looking at and studying, reflecting upon the letters of Paul this past week, yet perhaps we have often forgotten that Paul's letters were primarily very public in nature: intended to be read aloud in small communities. OUT-LOUD. They sought to teach, exhort, question, provoke, remind, and call to conversion all those who would listen to them shared within the context of a community gathering for liturgy, for prayer and study of the scriptures of the earlier testament and pieces that would be part of the newer collection of God's word revealed by the Spirit in Jesus to the glory of the Father. There were personal pieces: asking for common needs, greetings to those afar, warnings about individuals who had harmed him and made his life difficult and praise for others working with him. But the core and the heart of the letters were attempts to extend the understanding of belief and practice of fledging communities—small groups in a world of cultures, politics, economics and other religions.

The letters were perhaps at their heart about encouragement and hope, about experiencing once again the power of the presence of the Spirit and the Risen Lord,

when they gathered together to speak of Jesus, of the Father and of the Spirit abiding with them and teaching them still. And so, they often begin and end with prayers of praise, doxologies and addressed to the community of the saints (in this case in Rome) as well as including them in the presence of the Trinity. It was correspondence between Paul the writer (and his scribes), the community that would receive the letter and God the witness and source of the relationship between them. This is crucial to remember and take to heart, for the letters are witness and testimony to faith and to the heartening and strengthening of the community. If 'letters mingle souls' so strongly, then Paul sought to make his listeners take the words to heart, and in listening to obey his words, and make them come true, in reality in their circumstances with their particular grace and spirit of interpretation and practice. Those who heard the words were to become witnesses and living words of expression within the community and the community as witness to those outside, watching and listening to their faith in practice. So, as we listen to segments of Paul's letter to the Romans we are to listen (obey) and together seek to incorporate them (in body, mind and spirit) singularly in our faith and corporately in our practice, as witnesses for and with others.

There is a terrible and beautiful story of the power of letters that I want to begin with—to impress upon us the power of words penned and mailed and the effect it can have on others desperate, despairing, hoping and waiting for a word

that will allow them to continue to live—not just survive in the world. It is called **SHIPWRECKED WORDS** and comes from **VOICE OF TIME: A LIFE IN STORIES** by Eduardo Galeano, translated by Mark Fried. Copyright 2004 by Eduardo Galeano, published by Siglo XXI in Spanish. Translation, copyright 2006 by Mark Fried, published by Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt in English. By permission of Susan Bergholz Literary services, New York and Lamy, N.M. All rights reserved. (it appeared in **PARABOLA Magazine**, p. 49-50 Summer 2006. I will tell it orally so if you tape it you can put it in as I tell it— when taken directly off the tape, there s no need to secure copyright permission)

“After dark, Avel de Alencar worked away at his forbidden task. Hiding in an office in Brasilia, night after night he photocopied the military’s secret archive: reports, dossiers and files that called torture interrogation and murder confrontation.

In the three years of clandestine labor, Avel photocopied a million pages. The documents were a fairly complete confession by the military dictatorship then living out the final days of its absolute power over the lives and miracles of all Brazil.

One night, among the papers pulled from the files, Avel found a letter. The letter had been written ten years earlier, but the woman’s kiss that signed it remained intact.

From then on, he came across many letters. Alongside each was the envelope with the destination never reached.

He did not know what to do. A lot of time had passed. No one was waiting for these letters now, words from the gone and forgotten sent to places and people no longer there. They were dead letters. And yet, reading them felt to Avel like trespassing on something very much alive. He could not bring himself to return those words to the prison of the files, nor could he kill them by tearing up the pages.

At the end of each night, Avel put the letters in their envelopes, stuck on fresh stamps, and dropped them in the mailbox.”

[Note: at this point, I usually ask them to react/respond to the story, answering 2 questions, with the persons close to them in the room: 1. What does the story make you feel, stir up inside you? 2. What disturbs you in the story? And then they share some of that with me and I repeat it to the larger group, commenting on them in the context of theology. I'd like to put some of that in the written version of this talk—taking it off the tape recording if possible.]

Imagine receiving one of those letters! It would arrive without warning, from a friend, a father/mother, child, brother or sister, beloved husband/wife/lover of long ago and burst into your life afresh and demanding to be read, to be remembered and to be absorbed into one's flesh and soul. Would it provide

closure? Would it bring tears of resurrected grief mixed with wild joy? Would it enrage you once again at injustice and violence perpetuated on so many, beginning with the one you loved? Would it seep deep into your heart and would you find yourself reading it over and over again, learning the text by heart? Would it become a lifeline to the past and what was or a frayed skein that unraveled the life you had sought to live in the present or would it become a rope to throw in hope to a future that would be transformed because of those words? That is the way we need to read Paul's letters and learn some pieces by heart, making them so much a part of our souls, minds and practice that we become the words in flesh, walking around in our world today.

We will look at one segment of Paul to the Romans 8, but first we must do it in the context of a previous chapter 6 so that we have a perspective broad and deep enough to appreciate what he is saying to us. Paul questioned the Romans and us in this manner:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into his death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe we will also live with him. We know that

Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no long has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Romans 6:3-14 [translation is HOLY BIBLE NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, Tennessee, 1989.]

Paul is reminding us of the quality of our lives. We were told as we came forth from the waters of our baptisms: “You live now, no longer for yourself alone, but hidden with Christ in God.” Do we? We are to be alive to God in the Spirit of the Risen Lord. This life is characterized by freedom, by resurrection hope and by unbounded, imaginative and creative life forces that have been shared with us in the Spirit. Resurrection begins in baptism and the rest of our lives are practice for the fullness of resurrection that all will one day know and experience. This is the rock solid cornerstone of our belief and life together as the beloved children of God. And yet, the unasked question is always underlying these words: when we gather as Church, are we the visible sacrament of the presence of the Risen Lord in the world? Can others sense resurrection in us? Do we live our lives, our vocations, our jobs and relationships soaked in the water and oil of the resurrection that was our gift and grace from the moment of our baptisms? Individually, as religious communities and as Church do we witness to, express and proclaim the power of the resurrection at work in us and in the world for all to see, be amazed at, drawn towards and want? Always this is life—life ever more abundantly for all (John 10).

It is life that is based on justice, peace, forgiveness and reconciliation shared with all. It is life that is marked with mercy, with tender regard for all, especially the most vulnerable and needy, those excluded and blamed, those suffering, grieving and struggling just to survive in a world with massive gaps between those who have and those who have not and those who have enough but do not share; those who are crucified and those who do the crucifying and those who uncrucify; those who live resurrection life now in the freedom of the children of God publically and those who do not, or those who personally seek to but are not called to account for their lives in a community of believers.

This is the background for the text of Romans that is the heart of this talk (Romans 8: 18-25 and following 26-29). There is much talk of hope in this section of the letter. But what is hope? The Latin word for hope, sperare, comes from the Indo-European root spei, which means to expand. “To be hopeful is not only to feel expansive, but to count on an ever-flowing bounty while to feel despair is to feel constrained, to fear the springs of life are drying up.” (Scott Russell Sanders, essayist) Hope is a virtue and a gift, a discipline and a practice, a state of mind and something to be shared. It grows. It matures. It ebbs and flows. It rises and falls. Given away it explodes into many seeds blowing throughout the atmosphere, like the wind takes hold of spores in spring and scatters them far and wide. It cannot be contained, or kept to oneself or stored. Hope breathes for hope is the Spirit’s

presence in the world. So, to listen to Paul's words, we must pray first that our minds, our hearts our bodies and our souls will expand to absorb and be drawn into the reality of the words he proclaims.

[I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.] For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope,. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Rom 8:18-25)

[again, ask them to respond to the portion of Romans, which I will do by heart, not read it to them. And share in twos/threes and then in the larger group, coming up with the theology from them]

Hope is so hard to talk about, yet we try and borrow words that those who have struggled before us and found some words to express what hope is and what hope does. Then it is easier to recognize it when it is right in front of us, in people, in actions and daring risks. Here is what Rubem Alves says of hope in his book TOMORROW'S CHILD.

What is Hope?...it is the hunch that the overwhelming brutality of facts that oppress and repress is not the last word. It is the suspicion that Reality is more complex than realism wants us to believe, that the frontiers of the possible are not determined by the limits of the actual, and that in a miraculous and

unexpected way, life is preparing the creative events which will open the way to freedom and resurrection.

The two, suffering and hope, live from each other. Suffering without hope, produces resentment and despair. Hope without suffering creates illusions, naivete and drunkenness.

Let us plant dates, even though those who plant them will never eat them...we must live by the love of what we will never see. This is the secret discipline. It is a refusal to let the creative act be dissolved away in immediate sense experience, and a stubborn commitment to the future of our grandchildren. Such disciplined love is what has given prophets, revolutionaries and saints the courage to die for the future they envisaged. They make their own bodies the seed of their highest hope.

From Paul's words we are told again that the earth, all creation itself, along with all of us are constantly groaning and giving birth, laboring in pain and joy to become what God has set in motion for all of us in the body of Jesus Christ risen from the dead. This life is seeded in us, all of us, and it is seeded in the very earth/air/water/fire/ wood [the fifth elements in Asia] —elements of all creation and it is always aborning! All the seeds are seeking to break ground, to push into the air and light and to bring forth life ever more abundantly for all. We are as intimately bound to earth, to creation and all God has made, to the universe as we are to each other in the Body of Christ.

Earth holds this excitement, possibility, creative tension, hope, wild fecundity, freedom and imagination within itself as do we!

As Christ bearers, as children of the light, as beloved of God we often do not take these words to heart or reflect upon the power that lies submerged in them, below the surface, deep in their meaning. Someone once said, that the world itself, all of creation, the universe is the sacrament of the Spirit loose in history, in all places, circumstances. But we have often disparaged the world and abused creation, and misused the elements and resources and talked far too much about the next world/heaven than we have appreciated this earth, this world where God became human and dwells among us still. We do not honor this sacrament well, or respect it and we do not study it diligently, as though it is the contemporary scripture and revelation of God with us. And sadly, we do not celebrate it or praise God's goodness in it. And often we are not careful of it as a gift shared with us by the Creator.

Our mission as the beloved children of God, the inheritors and care-takers of the earth, those entrusted with the future of creation, as the brothers and sisters of Jesus incarnated and sent to earth because "God so loved the world" (John 4) is to hold the earth reverently and to draw forth its goodness and seek to let the power of the resurrection that sleeps within it emerge. We are called to 'tikkum olam' as the Jewish people exhort each other: 'to repair the world.' In Paul's image, we are to give birth, groaning in labor until all creation sings the glory of God.

Pragmatically it begins with undoing the ravages of sin, pollution, violence, misuse and mismanagement of all the resources of creation: air, water, food, land, ecologies, eco-systems, animals, birds, plants, minerals, all the substances of the earth, all that was created bound to each other as we were told in Genesis 1. We are all of a piece and we were meant to be whole. This word whole is the same root as the word holy. We are to live in communion with creation, not just one another. We are to make sure that the generations that come after us have clean fresh air and water, ground to plant food that nourishes and does not cause disease and death. We are to make sure that the ground and air and water is not toxic, filled with nuclear and biological waste and that those who come after us have plentiful and diverse forms of every kind of life. We are to protect what is endangered, and stop extinction. We must begin to be aware of the effects our life styles, our sins and violence do to the earth as well as to human beings. We must begin to atone for the destruction of earth and the insults to the Creator who in making each thing expressed something of the mystery of who and what is the Holy.

And at this stage of history, this massive radical shift of our priorities—beginning with the undoing of the harm we have done is not an option. What if we will not only be judged on what we have done for others: as clearly stated in Matthew 25 in doing the corporal works of justice for all—in providing food, water, shelter, medicine, education, freedom etc. for all but we will also be judged

on whether that food, water, air, earth, medicine and freedom was actually life-giving and not destructive, disease ridden and debilitating?

There is a marvelous creation story from the Hawaiian peoples called The Bowl of Light which puts some of these possibilities into words that remind us of truths we know, but often take for granted. And it speaks of the hope that is required of one's life and actions if we actually do believe in the Light. It looks at sin and redemption, at personal and communal responsibilities and how we are all rooted in resurrection hope using images that are simple, stark and evocative. This is The Bowl of Light.

As it was in the beginning and still it, when you were born, each and every one of you, you were given a bowl of light. With this bowl of light you can do anything at all! You can climb to the highest mountains and trees and see the flowers growing up there! You can swim with the sharks! You can learn all the languages of the birds and the seasons of tides of the oceans and airs! You can fashion and make things never seen before—to cross the deeps and for protection from the weathers. There is no limit to what you can do! The light is yours!

But you know already that the bowl of light holds only goodness and delight. You lie and a pebble is thrown into the bowl. You harm another human being and a stone is dropped into the bowl. You take what you do not need from the earth or the sea or the air and waste it and you throw rocks into your bowl. You

steal and leave others in want and lack and you drop another stone into your bowl of light. You kill someone, anyone for whatever reason and a huge boulder fills your bowl of light and the light grows weaker, fainter and less fraught with power and goodness. For light and stones cannot exist in the same place. Your bowl grows heavy and you grow hard like the stones and rocks in your bowl.

But remember all you have to do is dump your bowl and the light returns. It was always there and it shines forth once again with power and possibility. But it is hard, because the heavier your bowl becomes the less likely it is that you can dump your bowl and rid yourself of all those pebbles, stones and rocks. That is where your friends come in, and your community and those who really want you to be a human being. They can help you dump your bowl, and empty out all those stones that strangle the light of your soul. And you can rejoice and once again begin to live as your birthright hopes and expects you to live, in the light!

Sometimes you know the light in your own bowl and in others well and cherish it dearly and you can realize that you have a special calling—to love others truthfully and so you help others dump their bowls so that their light can emerge once again and expand as it was meant to. In fact, you realize you must dump their bowls and empty them of stones, even when they are unaware of what they have collected and are being burdened with, buried under—or they don't even want you to! This is your calling and it demands that you learn how to get out of the way of

the stones when they fall out and come tumbling down out of others' bowls like a landslide of rocks and boulders! Sometimes people say you are gifted to be able to do this but they also say it is dangerous for you also and it helps to do it with others, not alone.

And always you must seek to expand and strengthen the light in your own bowl so that you are lighter, freer, truer and good. Once the light is tendered in your own bowl there is absolutely nothing you cannot do! Anything at all that brings life, shares life and frees others to live. Remember when you were born, you were given this bowl of light. Honor it and hold it dear. [again, ask the questions and share with others in larger group and include here.]

An ancient story of islanders half a world away that speaks clearly of what we are called to do and who we are called to be as children of the Light, of the resurrection and freedom given to us by God in Jesus' and shaped and taught by the Spirit. We must look to our own lives, but we are to look to others lives as well and to the world around us. Nothing is to be destroyed, abused, selfishly appropriated, wasted or harmed. Even if it is done inadvertently or without intent, it must be undone and the stones must be removed. What destroys must be emptied out and transformed into life and light.

Paul goes on to tell us that we do not take on this mighty task of giving birth to resurrection life within us and to helping all of creation and the world give birth

to the resurrection and freedom and goodness that has been seeded in it by Jesus' life and death alone. We are given the Spirit to accompany us, teach us, lead us, drive us forward and to enliven us with imagination and creativity.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose...[we are] to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors, through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. [Romans 8:26-28; 29b;31-35;37-39]

What does it mean to live with this as our source, foundation and the very air of the Spirit that we seek to breathe ever more consciously in the world and with others? We must seek with others to be an alternative that brings hope by our

presence: an alternative to what is the dominant culture, life styles, values imbedded in the economic system, political arena, government and national heritage, even religious practices and biases that do not reflect the teachings of Jesus, especially those in relation to any harm, violence and injustice inflicted upon others. We are not to look like and act like everyone else beginning with the practice of any violent behavior or exclusion of others coupled with the necessity of providing all the basic needs of those we live with—expanding in our hope ever further out from where we actually live and dwell. It is both a spirituality that is personal but more so, practiced with others and in conjunction with the land we dwell on, the air we breathe, the food and water we consume and the habits of our lives. All our excess must be shared with others. In a world where the United Nations defines someone as being rich as ‘those who have more than what they need in order to survive today’ it is not a question of sharing our excess with others in need, especially our enemies, but it is a question of whether we ever actually practice the virtue of generosity and sharing beyond our excess.

We are called to alternatives of hope in community—in regards to what we do with common property, land, resources, investments etc. Do we invest in people, rather than funds and stocks? Do we loan at incredible low rates to those in need but seeking to get a foot hold in life so that they can live beyond mere survival for themselves and their families? Do we make sure that those around us

locally and those we minister with are afforded the same level of shelter, food and medicine, long term care and protection that we made sure we have access to? To take care of one's own, whether blood family or religious community makes one or a group good human beings. It is when that same level of care is extended to the stranger, the most vulnerable and those considered enemies that we begin to practice our religion.

Most of chapter 12 of Romans is Paul exhorting in very specific terms those in the community on how to behave. They are maxims and a lists of practices—do and don'ts that should serve as the foundation of daily living. The last two paragraphs would take a lifetime to learn to practice with others one lives with, as well as those one meets and encounters in daily life. It is an aggressive discipline and takes conscious intent, and reminders from others who hold us accountable as we struggle together to be witnesses and letters of hope to those around us in the world.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

[This is for starters! Now we get to some crux of resurrection living!]

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate

with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. [Romans 12:9-21]

What is important to remember is that this is not just exhortation that is to be personally taken to heart, but that the noun 'you' is to be plural; that all this is to be practiced assiduously together, in community, as witness and testament to our resurrection life begun at baptism. And all these exhortations need to be extended to the earth and all creation as well! We are at the point in history that if we do not care for the earth the way we are intent on caring for ourselves and those we love, there will be no earth for those who come after us. And we will be held responsible for treating what God has created and given to us to care for, as God has cared for us and judged if we do not, thus robbing others of a chance at fullness of life. We must listen to the Spirit that sighs within us, and sighs in the world and all that exists and we must bind our prayers and hopes to the Spirit and to the Risen Lord that intercedes for us before the Father. This life of resurrection has been entrusted to us and living resurrection life means that we draw forth that life and strengthen it and encourage it, and imaginatively nurture it and set it free in everyone and everything thing God has made.

We are very new at extending this power and Spirit of resurrection to the earth and creation (or to our enemies and other nations, and those who practice other religions). For far too long we have practiced Christianity and the gospel from a position of dominance and power, nationalistically, in our culture, politics, economics and place of authority, controlling others rather than submitting to others, in deference and without thinking so highly of ourselves that we humiliate others. [see Romans 12:3-8] We must learn to live Christianity and the gospel as servants, not as those expecting to be served and obeyed, but with humility [which means close to the earth, as though we were kneeling on the earth] in gratitude for resurrection freedom and life that God has lavished on us in Jesus.

We are young at living our baptismal faith, our resurrection lives. We need to pray again and again the words of Paul in Romans 11:33-36.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

‘For who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?’

“Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?’

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

Scientists now know some unbelievable things about the universe, the creation God has made and given to us in trust to pass on, in at least as good shape, if not better, than we inherit it, to others. From all the telescopes that have been launched and are sending back innumerable photographs of the solar systems and

what is ‘out there’ they cannot keep up with even cataloging all the data that is returning at breakneck speeds. Pictures like those from the Hubble telescope that are awesome and terrifying, yet even hard to assimilate for those of us who live in a small locale and do not often think of other continents, let alone other planets and galaxies and the seemingly limitless reaches of space. In fact, from all the material that has been sent back to earth, they now know that 97.9% of the universe is invisible. From all that they can see, they can extrapolate what we cannot see! Literally, “who has known the mind of God?” But in this age and period of history, the universe and its vastness and specificity, creation and its diversity and singularity, yet intimate connections to us and to everything else can reveal more of God to us than we ever dreamed was reality. If 97.9% of the universe is invisible, then what really do we know of the God who created it, sustains it and was incarnated, as one of us to walk upon it with us and dwells with us still?

Our mission in the world is to be light, to be the children of Light, to live resurrection now, as witness for all to see and experience in their lives. Our mission is to live with hope, wild and sustained in the resurrection’s power seeded in everyone of us and in every piece of creation and the universe, the presence of God with us in the Risen Lord and the abiding Spirit. Our mission is to make people feel amazement, wonder about this God of us—their vastness and power, their vulnerability and closeness, their fullness of life and justice and peace shared

with us who have been made in their image and likeness. Our mission is to offer alternatives of grace in every situation that reeks of death, or despair or destruction or violence. Our mission is more communal than ever before—to be the Body of Christ, crucified and risen from the dead, to spend our lives uncrucifying those who have known only injustice, unnecessary suffering, life that was mere survival and too early death. Our mission is to be a beacon of hope, of light for all to see and take heart from and sometimes to be rejected, and reacted to and to know persecution because the light is the truth that is stronger than the violence of injustice and sin. And we must do this and be this together with one heart and soul, one mind in Christ, drawing others to the Light—not in words primarily but in our presence.

And most probably our lives, as letters of God, as songs of hope, as poetry of life ever more abundantly won't be read in our lifetimes, but known and heard and understood years, even decades after we are gone and no one is expecting a letter from us. But we must live with such freshness and awareness of the extent and power of life in Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead that the generation that comes after us will marvel and wonder at our ordinary faithfulness, our care for the earth and for the life we passed onto them because we took to heart the words of an ancient nearly 2000 year old letter to the Roman saints. They will sense that we knew God as “Abba Father” and we had a sense of God's grace and

abundance in Jesus and that God's Spirit was ever seeking to give birth to us and to the earth we dwelled upon. And they will read the letters of our lives over and over again in gratitude and hope that they too would be able to write such a letter, leave such a light mark upon the earth and pass on such goodness to others who come after them. They will know that our souls mingled with earth's soul and God's Presence in the Trinity and even expanded to touch their souls with the letters our lives formed. In the end, all we can say and hope those who follow us know are these words of greeting from us: "To all God's beloved in Rome, in Madrid, in Spain, in Europe, in the world, on earth, who are called to be saints. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 1:7) "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Rom 15:13) "The God of peace be with all of you. Amen." (Rom 15:33)

[optional ending, depending on time] There is a story told in Japan about a famous haiku (short 3 line poem with the pattern of 7,5, 7 syllables) master Basho. Basho was a hermit for part of the year, over winter and he stayed close to home, living simply, helping anyone he could who was hungry, or visited, or needed help. He would work on his brushes and paper, meditate and pray and wait for the winter hold to break. The best haiku poetry is written in the change and shift of seasons between winter and spring, fall and winter, etc. And Basho would wait with

expectation for the first signs of spring, the snow melt, the easing of the fierce wind and bitter cold. Each year he would decide where he would travel for spring, and for inspiration for his words/poems. He saved his money because he would need it for travel, for lodging and for food. And he would write his poems and he would make enough to live on another year and bring beauty and truth into the world. This year he decided he would visit Kyoto, the city of gardens and temples, of surpassing beauty and just absorb all the trees coming to life, budding forth, blossoming: cherry, plum weeping cherry, etc.

Finally he began to travel, the roads were muddy and it was difficult. Soon he was covered with mud, wet and a bit miserable. But finally he arrived in Kyoto and set out for his first temple and the first of the cherry and plum trees and signs of spring taking over the earth again. But he didn't get far. He met a young woman on the street. She wasn't really begging, at least not in the usual sense. She would ask someone if they needed anything and then she would put it down on her list. Then she would ask them if they had anything to give, that they didn't need or use and she would ask them for it! And then she would move around, giving away what was given to her, and asking for what others didn't want or need. He was fascinated and started trailing after her. Then he gave her the money he has planned to use for his lodging, in bits and pieces to see what she would do with it. Amazed he watched it travel and transform a dozen peoples' lives with simple

things they needed—food, clothing, a gift for another, a shared meal, some seeds for a garden. Then he gave her more and more of his money and just followed her around the city and slept in the fields and in the temple gardens as they came to life and found such freedom and generosity and fullness of life as the woman went about her life, her work and her sharing. What do you need? Down on the list it went. What do you have to give me for someone else? And it was put on the list to be picked up later, or taken right then and there. And within days, all sorts of people met each other, learned a bit about the other, shared something with them, some became friends. Neighbors actually learned something of each other and strangers felt welcomed.

He didn't write any haiku at all! And realized he would have no money to buy brushes or paper or even to live on...he'd have to go home and beg and plant his garden and live more simply than ever he had before. But he did not regret it for even a moment. He had learned such a wondrous thing—a question, a bit of paper, giving something away to be passed on and being asked for what you needed. Amazing! And how a community, even a large family was born, how rich life became and how life was so full and unexpectedly delightful. How we really do fill up what is lacking in each other and together we are whole.

Later as the cold crept back into the world and the ground hardened he wrote one haiku—one that would become probably the most famous, oft-quoted haiku by the Japanese. It read.

“The scent of the flowers remains on the hands of the one who gives them away!” It was the gift he was given that spring and he wrote it so often in calligraphy—just the words, or with simple drawings, that he never really lacked for anything ever again.

When I first came to Japan more than 20 years ago when it was time for me to go, I was given a huge bouquet of flowers and they bowed low before me three times saying:

The scent of the Father’s creation remains on the hands of the one who gives it away. The scent of the Son’s life remains in the life of the one who gives it away. And the scent of the Spirit’s power remains in the heart of the one who gives it away. This is the life of the Trinity. May you live within and give it away.

This is the letter we are all called to be for others. And when we live this with all creation, then the scent of the resurrection, hope and life of God the Father shared with us in Jesus through the power of the Spirit remains on the hands, and in the heart and life of all who have been given it and give it away. May it be so. Peace upon us all. Amen.

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