

Sermon for Sunday, March 24, 2019 - "Thirst and Delight"

Third Sunday in Lent
March 24, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace from the One who yearns for you and delights in you.

The Psalmist prays, "Oh God ... my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water." The prophet Isaiah proclaims, "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters."

Everyone who thirsts - that is, each one of us. We all know what it is to be thirsty - to yearn for what will sustain our life physically, emotionally, spiritually.

This Lent we're reflecting on our own thirst while the Sunday School raises funds for Water to Thrive. We're doing this, in part, so that we will experience a sense of kinship and connection with the people in rural Africa who are in need of the wells built by Water to Thrive. Reflecting on our own thirst reminds us that we share a common humanity with these beloved children of God. We all thirst, we all have need. This is crucial to remember because it's so easy to fall into the white savior mentality, thinking we have to help those poor people in Africa.

Our call as Christians is to something much deeper and much more profound: It is to recognize our kinship with all people. I've been thinking about this a lot lately as I'm reading the second book by Father Gregory Boyle called *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*. Fr. Boyle also wrote *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*.

Boyle has served as a priest in a gang-heavy neighborhood of Los Angeles for over three decades. He's also the founder of Homeboy Industries which employs former gang members in a wide range of businesses including a bakery, a diner, a recycling center and a silk screen shop. Homeboy Industries provides training and support as former gang members seek to redirect their lives.

Fr. Boyle has brought hope to thousands of people - to those he calls "homies"; but he's clear that he needs them just as much as they need him. He stands in awe of how much trauma and heartache they have to carry, in awe of how much kindness, courage and wisdom they bring to the world. And whenever he starts to feel self-important, the homies never fail to take him down a notch, to give him a needed lesson in humility.

This awareness of mutual needs and mutual gifts has led Fr. Boyle to emphasize kinship. He says, if there is "No kinship, [there can be] no peace; no kinship, no justice; no kinship, no equality." He says, "We've become focused on peace, justice and equality, when the truth is, none of those things can happen unless there's some undergirding sense that we belong to each other, that we're connected, that we matter. But the good news is, if we focus on kinship, the byproduct of that effort is peace, justice and equality. It's how it happens."¹

Kinship is something our church body, the ELCA, also emphasizes with a practice we call accompaniment. Our focus is not on helping “those people” but on accompanying others - walking and working together with them towards the healing we all need. As we do this, we discover our interdependence, we see the giftedness of all people.

Fr. Boyle teaches that we need to celebrate the gifts of God that are poured out upon us all. We need to delight in God, in each other and this world we share.

Here he echoes another refrain from our first reading and our Psalm. Isaiah calls us to “eat what is good, and delight ourselves in rich food.” The Psalm indicates that an awareness of God’s presence can help our spirits “to be content, as with the richest of foods.”

When we delight in God, in God’s world and in one another, then we are renewed and not depleted.

Boyle says, “For me, it’s never about depletion. It used to be, when I used to think my job was saving lives. But now I think saving lives is for the Coast Guard. Our choice always is the same: save the world or savor it. And I vote for savoring it. And, just because everything is about something else, if you savor the world, somehow -- go figure -- it’s getting saved.”² Fr. Boyle and our readings today call us to recognize our common yearning and savor the abundance God showers upon us.

Beloved, all of this can happen for us each week as we gather for worship. We name our thirst and all that depletes us. We hear how much God yearns for us and delights in us. We are reconciled with God and each other through the mercy and forgiveness of Christ Jesus. And we get the chance to savor the gifts that God pours out upon us in worship and in community.

We get to practice delighting other people - even the people who drive us crazy. Fr. Boyle tells of one homie who was always complaining, always whining. One day this kid asked him for a blessing. Boyle blessed him by saying, “You know, Louie, I’m proud to know you, and my life is richer because you came into it. When you were born, the world became a better place. And I’m proud to call you my son, even though” - and Boyle reports he’s not sure why he added this part - “at times, you can really be a huge pain ...” And Louie looked up, and he smiled. And he said, “The feeling’s mutual.”³

We each make the world a better place. We each can be a huge pain.

Yet our call is to stand in awe of each other and what we each carry, to recognize our common need for one another and for God. We get to do that together each week. And, we get shaped into people who can love this thirsty, beautiful world.

In closing, I offer a poem by Hafiz called “With That Moon Language”⁴:

Admit something: Everyone you see, you say to them, “Love Me.”

Of course you do not do this out loud, otherwise someone would call the cops.

Still, though, think about this, this great pull in us
to connect.

Why not become the one who lives with a full
moon in each eye that is always saying,

with that sweet moon language, what every other
eye in this world is dying to hear?

Beloved, you are loved and cherished.
God yearns for you and delights in you.
Go forth to savor and delight in all God's people.

Notes

1. Leadership Education at Duke University Divinity School, "Faith & Leadership," February 23, 2016.
<https://www.faithandleadership.com/gregory-boyle-save-world-or-savor-it>
2. "Faith & Leadership."
3. The On Being Project, "On Being," November 22, 2017.
<https://onbeing.org/programs/greg-boyle-the-calling-of-delight-gangs-service-and-kinship-nov2017/>
4. Ladinsky, Daniel, trans. *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*, Penguin, 2002.

