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AMDG

Proper 7A – June 25, 2017

Do not be afraid. One of the most important themes of the Gospel. And, with this very difficult Gospel portion, with its many facets and disquieting language, the “do not fear” verses got my attention. Three times he said it in this passage. In the midst of warning his disciples about rejection, disunity, and discord, Jesus tells them three times not to be afraid.

To be sure, we can certainly relate to the language of division and discord. It’s what we see all around us today in our polarized political climate. It was also the case in Jesus’ time, perhaps even worse. Political and religious discord was what helped the Romans keep Palestine under their control. But, in the midst of this division and discord, Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid.

This passage is a continuation of Jesus instruction to his disciples in sending them out. Last week he warned them he was sending them as sheep among wolves. This week he warns them about rejection, disunity, and even family conflicts.

What kind of good news is this? It sounds more like trouble.

And, is trouble something that anyone of us would willingly embrace? Certainly not. We seem hard-wired to avoid trouble. Material success, peace and prosperity are what we all strive for in our lives, not only for ourselves, but for our families. And yet today’s Gospel says this -

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.... whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

With these words, Jesus very directly and vividly tells us that in order to find a deeper, richer life than the one which we live, we have to be ready to let go of all we hold dear...in fact, even to suffer. The greatest spiritual minds of the ages all agree – Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, the Buddha, Hindu yogis, Sufi saints, St. Francis of Assisi, the list could go

on and on – we have to let go of what is familiar and comfortable in order to find the full life God has prepared for us.

A few years ago, the Tuesday evening prayer group did a book study of *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the second half of life*, by Richard Rohr. It was very eye-opening for those who participated, especially me, because the book, focuses on this very idea...how suffering leads to fuller life.

The basic premise of the book is that spiritually, our lives are in two halves. In the first half of life our spiritual task is to establish ourselves – create our “container,” so to speak. We grow into our unique skills and talents, develop knowledge, embark on careers, build family, home, networks of friends, accumulate wealth – basically create the secure life that all human beings want for themselves and their families. That’s the first half of life. Creating the container.

The second half of life is about filling that container. It’s about stepping out of the bounds of the secure life we’ve established for ourselves and allowing the gifts of the Spirit to fill our lives. That often requires us to take a leap of faith and let go of things we value greatly – people, places, closely held beliefs, precious possessions. Sometimes it takes a spiritual tumble to give us the motivation to take such risks.

That’s why the first half of life is so necessary. We need to feel safe, secure, and capable. And we also need to feel loved. We have to know that we are beloved of God, and that nothing can ever separate us from that love. With self-confidence we can step out of our comfort zones and follow the call of the Spirit. People have varying degrees of success at this. But, too often, people become stuck in first half of life pursuits – building self-confidence becomes pride and defensiveness; building success and wealth becomes obsession and greed; building knowledge and skill becomes pride and the need to be right. For many, this is what life is all about, getting what you want and holding on to what you’ve worked so hard to get. And we become captive to the need for happiness, safety, security, and approval. Their pursuit becomes our identity, our sole motivation. But, Jesus came to show us there is more to life than material happiness, safety, security, and approval. That our identity and happiness are not to be found in the world. True peace, freedom, security, and happiness are only to be found in God. That is

life eternal. We just have to be willing to let go of what we thought was important in order to experience it. We need to be willing to fall.

Richard Rohr writes, “True liberation is letting go of our small self, letting go of our cultural biases, and letting go of our fear of loss and death. Freedom is letting go of wanting more and better things, and it is letting go of our need to control and manipulate God and others. It is even letting go of our need to know and our need to be right... We become free as we let go of...our need for power and control, our need for safety and security, and our need for affection and esteem.”

This is the way of the cross, the way of suffering and death. And, we try so hard to avoid this path. Even though suffering and death are part of the natural world – everything in nature suffers, dies, and gives birth to new life. But, we humans want immunity from the natural world. In wanting to be free from suffering and death, we don't realize we're asking to be freed also from the end result – renewal and rebirth. It is the Falling Upward that Rohr speaks of. Often our refusal to experience necessary suffering leads to suffering much worse than necessary. We avoid painful decisions, taking responsibility for mistakes, and asking forgiveness of those we've harmed. These actions only add to misery and prolong suffering, and do not lead to fullness of life.

These avoidances are the avoidances of the first half of life. They have to do with survival, establishing and holding on to one's security and one's possessions, and saving face,. The Gospel today speaks directly to those who are holding on, trying desperately not to have to step out of the comfort of the familiar - Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. In other words, if you won't let go and trust God, then you won't be able to experience the wonderful life God has in store for you.

Necessary suffering isn't always a matter of losing something cherished or giving up all you've worked for. Sometimes it's less about giving something up than it is about doing something we've been avoiding, or letting go of harmful attitudes. Sometimes it's taking on a new challenge, moving to a new living situation, or taking on a new vocation in life. Sometimes it's letting go of the things that annoy us, or of the

need to be a victim or martyr. Sometimes it's being willing to ask for and accept help when we've been used to doing it ourselves. These challenges are not problems to be avoided, but invitations into new life. They are opportunities to become more fulfilled, more loving, more generous, more accepting.

Throughout our lives, we're presented with obstacles, stumbling blocks, and conflicts. And God asks us to trust. To let go, to follow Him. We're asked to let go of the familiar answers and solutions of the first half of life. To forget about pleasing our friends and families, about following the party line, about doing what we were always told to do. We're asked to step out of that security and into the loving embrace of our Creator, who will lead us through the darkness into something beyond our imaginations, into the new life God has prepared for us from the beginning of time...if only we are willing to fall.