Reverend Jim's Sermon on Sunday November 12, 2023

One of the most instructive and surprising experiences I have ever had was my involvement with an ALANON group. You likely know that ALANON is an organization that runs support groups for people who have an addict in their life, as I do. The groups are based on the 12 steps program used in many groups for people with addiction.

Before the first meeting, I wasn't sure what to expect but I knew I needed and wanted support. What I found that surprised me so much was that the support offered had nothing to do with how to deal with the addict. It had nothing to do with that addict at all. The support was for me in dealing with that way I was dealing with myself. More specifically, and this surprised me even more, it was support to help me stay out of the addict's business altogether.

The underlying philosophy was this: that there is only one person I can change, only one person I am responsible for, and when I lose sight of this and try to make things better for someone else, or fix problems that are not mine, I usually only make things worse. While this is particularly true with people suffering from addiction, it is just simply true.

We can love one another, we can support one another with encouragement and guidance, but we cannot do another person's work for them, and when we attempt to do so, we only undermine that person and hold them back from getting on with their own life's work. And when we become bound up in the problems of another person as if they were our own, we can quickly lose touch with what it is we need to do ourselves, we lose sight of the areas in ourselves that need attention. It is easier to see the speck in another's eye than the log in our own.

The conversation in the ALANON group usually centered around supporting one another in letting go of our need to fix, cure and make things better for the addict in our life, so they could get on with their work of finding their way to sobriety.

This isn't easy to understand, much less to do, and that is why the support is necessary. Week after week. Some people had been in the group for years and still talked about needing the support to stay clear and focussed on their own work.

The work that the group called us to was to become more honest, more realistic, to have better boundaries, and to get out of business that wasn't ours. In simple terms, as I have said before, to remember always that there *is* a Saviour, and it isn't me.

The parable we heard in today's Gospel could have been written for the 12-step program. We have two groups of bridesmaids; 5 who have prepared themselves for the arrival of the bridegroom and 5 who have failed to prepare. The wise ones carried extra oil for their lamps,

while the foolish ones failed to do so. So, when the bridegroom was late, the foolish ones ran out of oil. Then the foolish bridesmaids begged the wise ones to give them some of their oil, to which the wise bridesmaids replied “sorry, but we cannot give you our oil.”

We cannot do the work of other people. Recently I was talking to one of my siblings about forgiveness and moving forward in our family, this person said that they simply weren’t open to the possibility. They had been too deeply hurt. There wasn’t much I could say. What I found myself saying was: “If I could give you the forgiveness and openness that I feel I would gladly do so. I would even sacrifice the good feeling that I have so that you could experience it. But I can’t do that. I can’t do this work for you.” (I can say gratefully that she has continued since then to pray for a forgiving heart.)

We can’t give our oil away, because it is the product of the work that we have done and are doing. This isn’t being ungenerous; it is just being realistic.

To be in community doesn’t means we can’t love one another, but we cannot relegate our responsibility to learn and grow to another person, and we can’t take the responsibility for their learning and growth upon ourselves, no matter how close we are to that person or how much we love them.

This is one of the paradoxes of Christian community that we are one body, but made up of individual parts, (the one and the many), and it is in the tension between being inextricably linked and still individual that community grows.

It is a delicate tension. I have been keenly aware lately of how difficult it is for a community to hold together when we are dealing with so many complex and controversial topics, same sex relations, reconciliation with first nations, differences in theology and practice; not to mention personality conflicts. It takes an enormous amount of good will and cooperation just to stay together. And we are in an era when the pull of individuality is particularly strong, and communal values of civility, humility, compassion and personal responsibility, are often in short supply.

We see on the world stage a breakdown of basic human values of respect and kindness. We see individuals, communities and nations who, rather than attend to their own business, find it easier to blame others for their problems. The violence we see around the world could not happen without such a breakdown.

And as acts of violence create further violence we seem to move further away from those values and principles that are so necessary for the human family to coexist peacefully.

We are in a time when it is becoming common for the foolish ones to take what they want, to take the oil of the wise ones.

In all of this the Gospel message remains clear, that whatever the circumstances we find ourselves in, we can only do our *own* work, only prepare *ourselves*, learn only for *ourselves* what we have been put on this earth to learn, even though it is best and easiest to do so in a community of caring people. In fact, it is doubtful that we can do this work without the support of a caring community.

So, what exactly is the work we must each do for ourselves? What is the spiritual work to which we are each individually called? It is less about doing than being. It is less about accomplishing than letting go. It is mostly about opening ourselves to grace, and relinquishing our preferences and what we think is necessary to make room for the divine on our lives. The first three of the twelve steps are a pretty good guide.

We admitted we were powerless— that our lives had become unmanageable.
Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

There is in today's Gospel, an element of urgency, a need to get on with things. There is that awful image of the door being slammed shut on the foolish bridesmaids.
I think that this sense of urgency in the teaching of Jesus isn't so much about the passage of time as it is about the importance of waking up, because Jesus knew how easy it is for us to go on as we always have, to find ways to continue to live according to our ego's desires and avoid the holy work of emptying ourselves in order to be filled with the Holy Spirit.
This work we are called to will not bring peace to the middle east or central Europe, but it will bring peace to our hearts, and the peace in our hearts is peace that is now in the world, because we are in the world, and it is our duty and privilege to spread the peace that has been given to us to the world around us. This is the only peace the world can ever know, and it begins with us, now, as we continue to open ourselves to the God of love, and to share that love wherever we can. That is where our hope lies, not out there in what others may or may not do or say, but here, where we find ourselves, in a community of faith.
As we Remember those who have lost their lives in war, let us rededicate *ourselves* to being peacemakers and truth speakers, to being light in a world where there is so much darkness.

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