

## **Homily – A Ministry of Presence**

**Rob Keim**

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On Friday night Jeff and I joined some friends at the SLO Repertory Theater to watch a live production of "It's A Wonderful Life." I'm guessing that most of you are familiar with the movie version of this story. It's a black and white movie that was made in 1946, and it stars Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed. In the story George Bailey does a lot of good deeds for his family and friends. When he falls on hard times, George Bailey wishes that he had never been born and an angel grants his wish. However, if George had never been born then all those good deeds wouldn't have happened, and we would have a pretty rotten world. George sees that his life has had meaning, the angel reverses the prior wish and all the people whom George had helped, surround him and pull him out of the dumps. We finish the story around the Christmas tree singing carols. The moral of the story seems to be that good deeds give our lives meaning and good things will happen to good people. It's a story that gives one a warm and fuzzy feeling, and we wish the world worked this way, but in at least two ways it doesn't. First, we know that bad things can happen to good people. And second, good deeds are to be shared not only with family and friends, but also with the stranger. It is this second truism that I want to focus on today. Jesus calls us to be present with the other.

Now, a short little book that I have read several times is "From Brokenness to Community". This book is about two lectures that Jean Vanier gave at Harvard Divinity School. In these lectures Vanier speaks of "the lessons he has learned from the disabled adults he serves at his community in France and at other houses. He speaks of his own healing and his own need for people. He speaks of the power of belonging and how it satisfies the deepest needs in people." One particular observation that I read in the lectures was about how many disabled adults feel marginalized by others. There is a sense of shame that develops when one is dismissed as having little value. Vanier points out that providing loving community is an effective way to help disabled adults feel valued again.

But it is not just differently-abled people who need community. I recently had a meeting with three of you. In the meeting we were trying to figure out how to best help another parishioner who has both physical and cognitive challenges. A sense of isolation has developed in the parishioner and this had resulted in depression. In our meeting, we kept coming back to visits as one of the most effective things that we could do for this challenged parishioner.

But there is more. I think we are all very aware of the widening demonization of our Islamic brothers and sisters. I think we are all aware of the acts of terror by a few

radicalized Muslims. Unfortunately, some use the acts of a few to justify and spread some pretty nasty and inaccurate stereotypes. As followers of Jesus we need to show support for our Muslim brothers and sisters. While some are building up walls to isolate Muslims, we need to actively working to break down those walls and build new relationships.

Differently-abled people, aging people, and those of other cultures who don't look and sound like us. Our good deeds need to be shared with our family and friends and those who are just like us. But, we also need to widen our circle of deeds to include the other. In this morning's Gospel reading we heard John the Baptist say "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." And in our Old Testament reading we heard this morning from the prophet Zephaniah. "I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth."

The Book of Zephaniah is a short book of only three chapters, and it should not be confused with the similarly named book of the prophet Zechariah. Zephaniah was written six hundred years before the birth of Jesus, and like other prophetic books it contains words that condemn bad behavior and concludes with the words of hope that we heard today.

Again, "I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth."

Now, unfortunately, we do many things in life that get in the way of our relationship with God, our relationships with others and our relationship with ourselves. We also do many things to hamper the relationships of others. Our actions or inactions make it difficult for others to be in healthy relationship with God, others and self.

However, when we become mindful, and self aware, then we can resolve to change. We can be mindful of the ways that differently-abled adults often live in isolation. We can be mindful of the shame of others – shame, by the way, that is caused when we seem to have no use or need for another. We can be mindful of how others are being demonized by false stereotypes. We can be mindful and self aware, so that we can resolve to change.

Today, I want to suggest to you that we can take action to become the hands and feet and voice of Christ in this part of California. We can join God to save the lame and gather the outcast. We can join God to change shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

There are a lot of ways that we can do this, but I want to narrow in on the opportunity we have to be present with others, especially others who are different than we are.

It is not so hard to be around people with whom we share a lot of similarities. It can be easy for us to be with others from whom we think we can get something. Maybe we want to get approval or maybe we want to be around smart, happy, beautiful people because we want to rub off on us.

It is not as easy for most of us to be with differently-abled adults, or people with shame or depression, or people of other faith traditions. But, we have the opportunity to be like Jesus.

Two thousand years ago God became a human being. Jesus was present with us on this earth for thirty-three years. He created relationships. He spent time with people. He listened to people. Jesus modeled a ministry of being present with all types of people, and we can do the same.

Part of the opportunity that we have to go deeper spiritually is to spend time with people who are often marginalized by contemporary American society, people who are often deemed less worthy, people that push us out of our comfort zone.

Are you feeling convicted to do this?

When I met with the three parishioners who were trying to figure out how to care for the other parishioner, we kept coming back to visits. Visits were important to make the parishioner feel less isolated and more valued. In that meeting I shared my own life experience and what I had to overcome to become more comfortable visiting with people. I had a fear of being with sick people or people with severe disabilities. I had a fear that I would say or do the wrong thing. I had a fear that I would make them feel worse rather than better. I had a fear that one visit would cause me to get sucked in and would create some type of ongoing obligation to do things for the person. Do you see yourself in these fears I have shared?

Now, all types of fear of the other are overcome by just being present with the other. Sometimes it is easier to be present with the other when a third more experienced person is with you. Sometimes it is easier to be present when you have done some preparation. And, it is almost always easier to be present with the other for the second or the third time. It is the first time that can be the hardest.

Many of you have been through this learning process and are already experiencing the beauty of visiting with others. You know the impact that your gift of time and

attention can have on another person. You know the impact that the person you visit has on your own spiritual depth. You know that your ministry of presence enhances your relationship with God, others and self. If you have not yet experienced the beauty of a visitation ministry, I invite you to consider whether you have a new call. As a period of preparation, Advent is a time when we should re-examine our own ministries and gifts. You can ask God if you are being called.

God, are you calling me to work with you to save the lame and gather the outcast?

God, are you calling me to change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth?

Our we can boldly pray, God please put the outcast into my life so that I may be present with them. If you do so then I assure you that you will have a wonderful life.