

Martha Rainbolt – Homily -- NOVEMBER 23, 2014

Bible readings for this day:

Epistle:

I Corinthians: 12-20; 26

Gospel:

Luke 10: 29-37

“Tied in a Single Garment of Destiny: No Man is an Island”

Prayer: Let us pray:

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our Redeemer.” OR

“Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart, that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

[Please be seated]

Think about where you were on September 11, 2001 when the World Trade Center was bombed. I was on campus at DePauw, and Sarah, a student I knew well, came running up to me, crying that New York City was being bombed. When I returned to my office, I realized that I had assigned John Donne’s “No Man is an Island” meditation for that afternoon class in Baroque Literature and Music. When I walked in the classroom, it was eerily quiet – a group of students who were usually buzzing were very still. So I asked them to read aloud with me these words from that meditation:

[Read from Meditation 17 – section 3]

“No man is an island, entire of itself: every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor [house] of thy friend’s or thine own were: any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

We went on reading until we completed the Meditation. It was again very quiet and then the students began talking. Yes, we are all connected to those who lost their lives in New York City and in Pennsylvania today. But are we also connected to those who planned the bombings, those who hijacked the planes? We ended up with more questions than answers, but Donne’s words helped us think through the tragedy our country had experienced.

Today I want to talk with you about some ideas in John Donne's meditation, circling around Donne's emphasis on the inter-connectedness of the members of the human family, all members of the body of Christ.

First a little about Donne:

lived from 1572-1631 – time of Shakespeare and the King James translation of the Bible

In his maturity, he was Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, but earlier a womanizer, a devout Roman Catholic who converted to the Church of England – a strange, passionate man – full of love for the physical life of the world, as well as the spiritual life with God. One critic writes of Donne that "he loved women with his wits, loved God with his senses." (Raine, 372) Wracked by doubt and skepticism, throughout his life.

Kathleen Raine on Donne: " In JD, we have doubt at its most heroic, redeemed by its own intensity, and achieving the stature of faith. For greater than a complacent belief in something trivial, is the doubt of something great. For to doubt is in itself to assert and establish the values doubted."

This doubt has been part of my life for a long time. When my First husband John died at age 32 – I was angry with God, and the people of the church intensified my pain. They tried to reassure me with phrases like "it is all part of God's plan." My unspoken response was "I don't want to have anything to do with a God who makes plans like that." Another hurtful comment was "many have suffered as you are suffering" – I am supposed to feel better because others are as miserable as I am????? None of this made sense to me – so I stayed away from church and from what seemed to me to be simplistic and just plain wrong-headed ideas.

Since that time, I have calmed down some, but I have spent many hours and days worrying about Christian doctrine – what does it really mean? How does it connect to my life? Is it truth or superstition? When I was a teenager, I thought I'd know when I was 40. Well, came to 40 and it didn't happen. I'm in my seventies now and it still hasn't happened. I understand more now, but there is still confusion, skepticism, doubt. [Part of the problem is the complexity of it all – sometimes our lives and the lives of those we love seem to swirl in a jumble of contradictory images and ideas. And we just can't put it all together. ]

So, for me, doubt is a part of faith, rather than an enemy of faith.

Tennyson, "There is more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds."

So Donne, still struggling with his faith, wrote these meditations when he was very ill with typhus, a disease which was usually fatal in 17c London. He is contemplating his own death and trying to work through his relationship to God and to his fellow human beings. He was confused and doubting his own faith and his assurance of resurrection. But he pushes through his doubt to a deeper faith.

Part of the Donne's resolution – and an important part of mine – comes from the assurance that we aren't alone in the struggle for spiritual understanding.

- A. In the Corinthians passage we heard this morning, Paul emphasizes that we are all connected to the Body of Christ

Corinthians 12:12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jew or Greeks, slaves or free- and all were made to drink of one spirit....<sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”

In the final prayer of the service we use each Sunday, we say , “Eternal God, heavenly Father, you have graciously accepted us as living members of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ....”

So we are all part of the Son of God and joined by his spirit, and we are altogether in the spiritual quest. I don't have to figure things out by myself; there is Deb Smith, Terry Noble, Jim Mannon, Father John – and others in our church who worry through these things as well

I am often puzzled by these words from Corinthians. Of course, we are members of God's body in the sense that we are part of the Christian community, but does it go deeper – in some miraculous way, are we literally part of the physical body of Christ? For John Donne, we are. We are all joined together in a radical way with all of humanity, even with those who have died.

\*\*\*We are connected to those who have left this world but who live on because of our love for them and memories of them.

Here is another passage from Donne's Meditation:

“All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; ... and God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again, for that library where every book shall lie open to one another.”

I love the image of a gigantic library filled with volumes containing the lives of every person who now lives or has lived on our earth. Can you imagine this set of books, going on and on, farther than the eye can see – all of the stories of all of the lives of those who have died and those now living.

I would like to add something more to Donne's image. When a loved one is gone, each of us writes a chapter about that person. We feel their love in our lives; we hear their voices. We talk to each other, adding our stories about them to the ones they wrote while they were here

As some of you know, I am a big baseball fan. And it's all because of my Dad who has been gone a long time. When I was in grade school, Dad and I listened to baseball games on the radio. We listened to Bob Prince from KDKA in Pittsburgh broadcast the Pittsburgh Pirates games. Dad never talked much; he was a quiet man, but give him a baseball game and he had lots to say. “OK, sugar, that inside pitch is setting the batter up. He will swing at the high outside fast ball – and miss it.” “Now, sugar, get ready for the hit and run – the count is right and that's a really fast runner on first.” Now I have a grandson Joseph who is a fan. All this fall as he and I have been emailing about the playoff and world series games, I find myself using all of Dad's phrases. One time I even called him “sugar,” – a mistake when

you are talking to a 9 year old boy. But now Joseph who didn't know his great grandfather is getting to hear this chapter in my Dad's book. Dad's story continues to be told, a new chapter has been added – this one about the his great-grandson and the Braves and the Cardinals.

\*\*\*\*\* I want now to move to the “But.”[explain the word.] It is easy to tell each other the stories of the lives of those we loved. But what about all those from whom we feel disconnected???

Often it seems that our moral community includes only those we have contact with; those whose lives are entwined with ours, those who think as we do.

So we deny Donne's common humanity. We care about others, yes, but only about **some** of the others, the ones most like us.

In the Gospels Jesus doesn't accept this narrow characterization of our “common humanity.” Over and over again, he insists that the outsiders must be included, must be made insiders. Throughout the Gospels we hear stories of Jesus' love and friendship with prostitutes and tax collectors, with outsiders of every kind. The reading about the good Samaritan from the book of Luke is just one example of Jesus' refusal to divide the world into good guys and bad guys. The Samaritans were hated by the Jews; they were the ones who didn't belong, had even desecrated the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. But Jesus uses the Samaritan as his model of a “good neighbor.”

Sometimes with good reason, we fear those who are different from us. A friend of mine was on an airplane recently when the pilot's voice asked if anyone on the plane spoke Arabic. Then a young middle-eastern man walked quickly up the aisle. She said that everyone was very quiet – very fearful. It turned out that an Arabic man had had a heart attack, and he didn't speak English, so the crew needed help in order to care for him. I would have been frightened if I'd been on that plane. It is easy to fall into this pattern – to do our own kind of profiling and generalizing about an ethnic or racial group.

We have to fight this prejudice, this bigotry. We need to work constantly to affirm our humanity's connections, its togetherness.

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in “Letter from Birmingham Jail” that “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Yes, there were the terrorists who planned and executed the horror of Sept 11, 2001 but who is the enemy? Certainly not all Arabic peoples or all followers of Mohammed. Karen Armstrong's book, “A History of God: The 4000 year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, describes all of us as the people of One God, the monotheists, -- we have much more in common with each other than we have ideas that divide us. We all follow the same God – we are all the holy people , as Father John reminds us every Sunday.

In closing -- to return to John Donne 's meditation:

The church is [Catholic,] universal, so are all her actions; all that she does belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that head which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body whereof I am a member.

Donne repeatedly emphasizes the universality of our common humanity – we are all “tied in a single garment of destiny.” Our enemies are not those different from us but those who would rend our common garment, destroy the fabric of our humanity which joins us together. When we think of 9/11 or other terrors of our modern world, we need to think not of groups of people but of individuals, individuals whose hearts are filled with hatred, the deranged, fanatic person who wants to do us harm, --- for to John Donne, Martin Luther King, Jr., Paul in his letter to the Corinthians and to Jesus of Nazareth -- to harm any of us is to harm us all.

Our Christian faith calls us to a radical kind of togetherness; we are not simply neighbors; we are even more than our brothers' keepers; we are all members of one body.

**No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.** [If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were;] **any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.**