

**05/12/2019**

Lord, listen to your children praying,

Lord, send your Spirit in this place;

Lord, listen to your children praying,

Send us love, send us power, send us grace! AMEN

The readings on any particular Sunday speak to us wherever we happen to be at that point in our lives. This is why it is important to really listen to the readings even if we have heard them many many times. God speaks to us through the readings and I hope, at least some of the time, through the sermons.

Such is the case with our psalm this morning which we are all very familiar with. Not as much I suspect with our other readings today.

So much came to my mind this past week, when I read about Dorcas and Peter as well as Psalm 23. Late in the day on May 1<sup>st</sup>, Navy Veteran, Randy Stidham, died by apparent suicide. It happened after the 59-year-old held officers, in a daylong standoff, at his Adrian home. American Legion Veterans were present at a vigil held the night before his funeral and attended by around 100 well-wishers. I went to the cemetery service the next day, and despite the rain, many well wishers were present there also as well as the American Legion Funeral detail from Hudson and several members of the Ghost Riders. This brings up concerns over continuing veteran suicides and PTSD in general.

On May 4<sup>th</sup>, we heard about the death of 37 year old Rachel Held Evans, Episcopal Author and Blogger, mother of two young children and the spouse of Dan Evans.

Rachel was hospitalized in mid-April. On April 14th she blogged: "If you're the praying type - I'm in the hospital with a flu + UTI combo and a severe allergic reaction to the antibiotics they gave me. Then she said, "(I'm totally going to miss GOT!)" I had to think about that one for a while. Mistaking it for a church conference, I finally figured out it meant Game of Thrones. Silly me.

She was placed in a medically induced coma after her brain began suffering constant seizures, according to updates posted online by her husband.

On Saturday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, he wrote that she had experienced extensive brain swelling after being weaned out of the coma.

In her last post, on March 6, Evans wrote about the beginning of Lent and the frustration and grief that readers of faith might have over their own churches, citing recent divisions in the United Methodist Church over LGBTQ inclusion.

She said, "It strikes me today that the liturgy of Ash Wednesday teaches something that nearly everyone can agree on," she wrote. " 'Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.' Death is a part of life. My prayer for you this season is that you make time to celebrate that reality, and to grieve that reality and that you will know you are not alone."

2 months later, she died.

At 29 yo, like millions of her millennial peers, Rachel didn't want to go to church anymore. The hypocrisy, the politics, the gargantuan building budgets, the scandals. Church culture seemed so far removed from Jesus. Yet, despite her cynicism and misgivings, something kept drawing her back.

She wrote about finding her way from her Evangelical roots to the Episcopal Church.

Concerning her book, 'Searching for Sunday'; she wrote:

"It seemed fitting to arrange the book around the sacraments because it was the sacraments that drew me back to the church after I'd given up on it. When my faith had become little more than an abstraction, a set of propositions to be affirmed or denied, the tangible, tactile nature of the sacraments invited me to touch, smell, taste, hear, and see God, in the stuff of everyday life again. They got God out of my head and in to my hands. They reminded me that Christianity isn't meant to simply be believed; it's meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people. They reminded me that try as I may, I can't be a Christian on my own. I need a community; I need the church". (Rachel Held Evans).

In our readings from Acts, Tabitha, or Dorcas as she was called in Greek (both being names that mean "gazelle"), was indeed a unique individual in the book of Acts in that she, obviously a woman, is referred to in the text with the feminine-gendered word meaning "disciple," (matheytria). Just like the usual masculine title, the feminine title simply means, "one who has been instructed, or taught."

This is the only place in the New Testament where the feminine form of the Greek word for "disciple" is used. When you consider how unequal the relations between men and women were in Jewish culture at that time, this is another example of how things had been turned upside down in a culture so affected by the presence of Jesus. Common fishermen like Peter preach to the authorities at the Temple, paralyzed men are up and walking about, and a

woman named Dorcas leads a compassionate, loving assistance program among the poor at Joppa.

Especially in the first century, widows tended to be poor, on the bottom rung of the ladder of society, without anyone to represent them or to protect them. These are the ones to whom Tabitha has given life.

Being a disciple, Dorcas certainly would have been known for teaching the ways of Jesus. But there was more than this. She modeled discipleship in that she provided for those less fortunate in her community. Her death affected many who relied on her gifts and they were devastated. She was a true Christian leader. This may explain why the other disciples knowing that Peter was nearby, urgently requested his presence. We don't know for sure, but it is likely that they hoped Peter could do something. They would have obviously been aware of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and they were also very aware of Jewish history where Elisha raised up the poor widow's son after he had died. Peter did come and restored Dorcas back to her beloved community.

Anyone who has experienced the death of a loved one can relate to the urgent request of the disciples for Peter to come. We all know Psalm 23 well. We know that God will be with us in times of trouble, times of great stress and anxiety, times of great sorrow. God does not promise us that we will not experience any sorrow or pain, but will travel ahead of us and walk beside us to help us through.

I have no problem believing that if Peter was here today, he could have been called urgently to Rachel's bedside and raised her from the dead for no other reason than for her to get up and continue tending to her flock, which would include her husband and young children as

well as the countless number of those who followed her work. As a priest, the one thing I would never say in this case, is that Rachel is in a better place. Yes, she is in a good place, but the better place for a young wife and mother would be back with her family. Would Randy's family have urgently called for Peter to come? I am sure that they would have. In both cases, all **we** can do is to surround their loved ones with love and prayers.

I am fairly sure both Randy and Rachael did not know even 2-3 months ago that things would turn out as they did. Maybe Dorcas didn't either. But she got a second chance due to Jesus and Peter.

How many times have you heard the Bishop say; "If your congregation ceased to exist, would anyone notice"? What are the ways that we minister to others as individuals and as a congregation? And if we are no longer here to do those things, will they be missed? That is something we need to figure out. What I do know is that we need to find ways to love others; to welcome others. To include others in our lives.

I realize that some of us will ask the question; "What can I do". I am too old or I don't have enough energy or time. But ministry can happen in the tiniest of circumstances. A person named Bea Salazar told this story in 2000:

"In 1990, I had undergone back surgery and was on disability. I was depressed and just trying to get through each day. One afternoon, when I was putting out the trash, I saw a little boy digging in a dumpster for food. I took him inside, made him a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, and sent him home. Fifteen minutes later, there was a knock at my door, and I opened it to find six more kids standing there. "Is it true that you're giving away peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches?" one of them asked.

I couldn't believe that there was no one caring for these kids. It was summer, and school was out. They told me that their parents had to work. The next day, more children showed up, and more arrived the day after that.

When school began again, kids came and asked for help with homework. Volunteers and supplies from local churches and schools poured in. My landlord donated an apartment, and soon I had 100 children coming to visit each day. Ten years later, five of the kids have begun community college.

I never thought that making one peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich would grow into something that would affect so many lives - especially mine. Those kids pulled me out of myself. There was a point when I stopped thinking about my own pain and started concentrating on somebody else's. It's true that when you help others, you help yourself".

{—Bea Salazar, "Is it true that you're giving away peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches?"  
Fast Company, December 2000, 108.}

What this story tells us is that we are never in this by ourselves. We have others to support us; we **need others** to support us. Love does not happen in a vacuum.

What the deaths of Rachel, Randy, and countless others do tell us is that we simply do not know how much time anyone of us has. All we can do is to live life to the fullest and love to the fullest. When we come face to face with God, and we will, we want to know that we did all we could.

AMEN