



Dear friends in Christ

July 19, 2020

Pentecost 7, Proper 11

“As in Travail”

The Rev. John C. Forney

Isaiah 44:6-8, Romans 8:18-25, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The congregation was dumbstruck that Sunday morning as Jai and I stood before the altar during the time of announcements to announce that we were expecting. Yes, Abraham and Sarah, in our old age, expecting our first.

I still remember one of the congregation busybodies taking me aside after the service to express her relief. “I’m so glad to hear your announcement. I just thought Jai was letting herself go.”

Having come from a family with not the best example of fatherhood, I was pretty insecure about my nurturing ability. As the day drew near, waiting over two days of contractions, my nerves didn’t settle down. After the third trip to the hospital, the midwife suggested we call in medical expertise.

In came two people, I remember the names exactly – they were classic – Emerson and Newton. No. I'm not kidding. And they both looked like they were only a year or two out of high school. By this time, we were looking at a caesarian section. I thought to myself, "These two kids are going to cut up my wife?"

Was Jai in travail? No, she was pumped full of happy juice. Not feeling any pain, or much else. As the hospital had a policy that fathers could be present for the birth, there I was as Dr. Newton made the incision. Biting my fingernails. Though I had been an Army Medic and had seen lots of blood, I was never related to any of these patients. You might say, I was the one in travail.

When a boy was delivered, it didn't help my anxiety to hear several loud slaps and our pediatrician, Dr. Clint, yelling, "Breathe, damnit. Breathe!" Finally, there was a reassuring piercing cry and I knew the worst was over. Talk about "high anxiety!"

Paul, in his letter to the Christians at Rome speaks to such times as "high anxiety."

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons and daughters, the redemption of our bodies."

"But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

Remember the old TV show, "Kung Fu?" "Patience, young grasshopper." As the old master would seek to settle his young novice.

We are in the midst of a contagion unlike anything our generation has ever seen. We have suffered more death than twice the casualty rate of the Vietnam War. We are sick and tired of being shut in. We are even sicker when we come across people not wearing masks in public – those, who through their carelessness, through just not giving a rip, who through their dismissive attitude, continue to put the rest of us at risk. And prolong the shutdown we all are sick and tired of. As Fanny Lou Hamer was fond of saying, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

And that goes double if we have young children at home.

With COVID-19, we’re all in travail.

We wonder how much education our children will lose. This week the Claremont Unified School Board went back into emergency session to reverse its decision of a week previous. Now, there will be no face-to-face school in session. All teaching will be by internet. I’m sure parents are groaning in great travail. And patience for grasshoppers, or much of any other creature, is in short supply. The only hopes parents had for respite have been dashed.

Paul can talk about hope. Well and good for him. He didn’t have a cooped-up seven-year-old and a junior higher to deal with! Yeah, “...we wait for it with patience!” Right.

All creation groans in COVID-19 travail.

For people of faith, our usual support is lacking or somewhat anemic. We at St. Francis miss each other terribly. We long for a hug. We long for that familiar face. With the reoccurrence of massive infections, our bishop John counselled patience and

forbearance. It may not be until September or later before we can safely resume worship on site.

One wit remarked, “When this is all over one half of us will be excellent cooks and the other half alcoholics.”

Uncertainty and deprivation bring out the worst AND the best in many. The parable of the seeds explained in Matthew 13 indicates, amongst the church folk, there is some variation. Some look like followers of Jesus, and some – we’re not quite sure WHO they are following. But it sure doesn’t look like Jesus. In such situations, folks were tempted to judge. Divide the congregation up into First Class Christians and Second (or Fifth or Tenth) Class Christians.

I remember as a young child our family attended a Presbyterian Church. Faithfully. I knew my father must have had a large pledge because one Sunday morning my teacher whispered into my hear that she so appreciated the large financial support our family gave the church.” I wasn’t old enough to know that such a comment was out of place. But I did feel a bit embarrassed for having been singled out.

Well the day came when our old pastor retired and we got a new fellow. A number of weeks afterward we stopped attending. When I finally had the nerve to ask my dad what was wrong, he told me the issue. This new pastor believed in the Calvinist doctrine of Predestination. He, in sermon after sermon, let those sitting in the pews know where they were predestined to end up. And where he was predestined to go. And they weren’t the same place. Eventually, my parents, and a number of others, got tired of

hearing that they were unalterably bound for perdition. Hellfire is not a very good selling strategy for the love of Christ.

Such is the situation in Jesus parable of the seeds. Don't condemn. Don't shun or cast out. Let God sort 'em out in the end. It's beyond our pay grade.

And if we are honest, brutally honest, with ourselves, each of us is a mix of good wheat and weeds. Some of us filled with a lot of devil grass and puncture vines

You look how this pandemic has brought out the best and the worst.

Sometimes it is just a little act of kindness that makes my day. Like the image of a young fellow helping an elderly woman get her shopping cart of groceries out of the bus as she was exiting the door. A priceless, simple act of kindness.

Yes, there are inconsiderate, narcissistic people who will not wear a mask, but there are so many who do. It was such a climate of common consideration that enabled Taiwan, which has a little over one tenth the population of the United States to get through their experience with COVID-19 with only seven deaths. Seven deaths in the whole country! Just imagine. If we had been as proportionally successful as Taiwan, we would by now only have about 97 deaths – instead of 138,000. And counting. It's all about leadership and consideration.

We might also note, incidentally, that the countries that have come through this pandemic intact -- Taiwan, New Zealand, Denmark, Germany, Iceland – they all have one thing in common. They're all lead by women. Causes one to ponder. Could it be that too

much testosterone is an impediment to doing the right thing, the bright thing? Just sayin'...

As our bishop John says, WWJD? "Wear a mask."

Yes, in spite of the travail and struggle, there is yet much joy to be had. The people I meet on my walk, almost all are wearing masks.

I turned on my Facebook site and came across the most post someone had left me, an orchestra playing on the streets of Havana, Cuba. Rondo alla Mambo' by Sarah Willis and the Havana Lyceum Orchestra. Rhythm. Bodies swaying. Smiles on the old faces of folks peering out of second floor windows. Check it out. It will delight your heart and warm your soul.

Travail, yes. But in solidarity we move through COVID-19. Bowed but not broken. Knowing discouragement, yet immersed in the joy of solidarity from common support. Surrounded ever by that glorious company of saints, those living and those having gone on before – in them I rejoice.

Travail, yes. BUT, JOY IN THE MORNING!

I also rejoice in this Spirit-filled meditation by a Lutheran pastor serving an Episcopal congregation, Grace Memorial Episcopal Church in Darlington, Maryland. Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber:

I do not know when we can gather together again in worship, Lord.

So, for now I just ask that:

When I sing along in my kitchen to each song on Stevie Wonder's Songs in The Key of Life Album, that it be counted as praise.

And that when I read the news and my heart tightens in my chest, may it be counted as a Kyrie.

And that when my eyes brighten in a smile behind my mask as I thank the cashier may it be counted as passing the peace.

And that when I water my plants and wash my dishes and take a shower may it be counted as remembering my baptism.

And that when the tears come and my shoulders shake and my breathing falters, may it be counted as prayer.

And that when I stumble upon a Tabitha Brown video and hear her grace and love of you may it be counted as a hearing a homily.

And that as I sit at that table in my apartment, and eat one more homemade meal, slowly, joyfully, with nothing else demanding my time or attention, may it be counted as communion.



The Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber

She gets the “Last Word.”

Amen.