A close up of a sign

Description automatically generated

**December 15, 2019 – Jesus the Rescuer**

**Given by Rev. Mattei**

It has been a learning curve for me to stay out of people’s business. I mean, I have noticed how easy it is for me to come to people’s rescue when they experience difficulties in their lives. I want to be there for them, make their troubles to go away and wanting for them to be happy. Even though this “fixer” approach is common to all, it seems to be more frequent in men. We can’t stand the sight of people we care about suffering and in pain. When this fixing mode kicks in, there are a series of unforeseen consequences to consider: we are overstepping our boundaries by taking over other people’s emotional stability process; even though we think we are showing care for others, we are actually focusing

on ourselves and our discomfort in the face of stress and anxiety; we rush, in panic and mindlessness, into our “rescue” mission (rescue of ourselves more than of the other); we treat our loved ones as helpless recipients of our goodwill efforts; we disempower them of their natural ability to access their inner resources; we engulf them with our own anxiety; we end up telling them what they must do to “get rid” of the stressful issue and tying them to our subjective and impersonal strategies.

I’ve learned that a more helpful way is to stay grounded, observe my emotional self, attend to my emotional stability, and make all efforts to remain connected to the other person. In other words, I have learned that I need to grow out of it and step out of the knight-in-shining-armor role. In the face of someone’s suffering, whether physical, emotional or spiritual, I focus certainly not on distancing myself nor on taking over and hijacking the emotional process but on being present with a listening ear, as an advocate and as a resource to tap into rather than as the one with all the answers. Often we think that showing love means taking someone’s ache away. More often it means being present to one another; it means being enriched by the silent understanding and warm embrace; it means to witness with compassion someone’s struggle to face the harsh reality and rise to the challenge to accept what is and at the same time to do what needs to be done to improve one’s lot.

At times we have misunderstood Jesus. At times we have convinced ourselves that having faith in God’s Beloved Son means that he would make all our troubles disappear. Somehow we have grown assured that the Messiah would take our cross if we prayed hard enough, that he would step on his cross and we would be home-free automatically. Somewhere along the years, we have made him our cosmic “Fixer,” the sacrificial Lamb that takes our sins away. By a strange twist of our limited understanding, we have contented ourselves with making him our substitute and the lightning rod of God’s wrath for our sins. We have disempowered ourselves in the act of reversing upon Jesus all responsibility for our well-being and salvation. God through Jesus does respond to the cry of the poor, but God does not intend for the poor and for us to remain passive and powerless recipient in the challenging yet creative process of living. Jesus’ cross is not God’s way of rescuing us from our cross. Jesus’ cross is the powerful testimony of a God who chooses the apparent “powerlessness” of a silent presence to be close to us. Jesus “suffers” the emotional and physical closeness of a true and faithful lover who is ready to offer presence and endure rejection. The Word through whom all came into being chooses the way of humility and vulnerability to demonstrate trust in our deep desire to seek Truth in wisdom and light.

This is what I understand the gospel message to be. Jesus calls, equips and empowers each one of us *so that* even though still physically blind we may see, even though physically lame we may walk and skip for joy, even though still walking through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23) we may fear no evil. Through his light, wisdom, and healing Jesus frees us so that our caring presence in the world may be genuine, rewarding and life-giving.

When we see much brokenness around us, we wonder whether God cares. So did John the Baptist in his question to Jesus from prison. This is actually a proper Advent question for those like John and all of us who live in-between times, the “already” of Jesus’ presence and the “not yet” of his second coming and the fulfillment of the kingdom promises. What’s the recipe for a meaningful and helpful life in the face of so many needs around us? What’s the “prison” from where we ask like? Are we contained by the prison of our tribal values, the prison of our comfortable lifestyle, the prison of our social norms, the prison of our rigid thinking? Is our prison not allowing us to see God already at work in our midst?

Jesus redirects John’s expectations to see what kind of impact Jesus’ presence in the world was having. At times, we ourselves become impatient and have a hard time understanding and accepting Jesus’ way. We become convinced we have a better way of bringing perfection to the world. We trust our self-help books and are eager to announce: “I did it my way!” We fail to notice we have succumbed to impatience and the allure of quick fixes. What we do not notice is that we have not really been helpful but in a way brushed quickly aside our discomfort with the world’s pain and with our discouragement that our efforts may truly bring about the needed change. Helplessness, emptiness, and cynicism will easily manifest themselves in this depleted emotional environment.

We long for a God who can fix the problems of the world because in a way we mistrust our power to care and to feel empathy for others. We want the vengeance and terrible recompense of God that Isaiah 35 promises because we seek vengeance for the injustices we see in the world. We forget to tap into Jesus’ non-retaliatory way as the most powerful modeling of being there for one another, in true love and faithfulness. When we demonstrate understanding and compassion, when we address and denounce deprivation and injustice, the desert of human relations will give up its aridity: it shall blossom and rejoice, and all the people shall see the glory of God in acts of kindness and respect.

How can we express our care for others in a way that does not diminish them? How can our love be liberating and allow people to see, walk, hear and experience renewed life? Jesus’ non-anxious and non-retaliatory closeness to humanity shows us the kind of balanced and mature life we long for. We want to be present and helpful to others but we don’t want to overstep our boundaries and take over their responsibility to a meaningful existence. We may want to acknowledge that our own willful blindness and deafness, our indifference and our lame walk away from people’s suffering are but just the opposite of taking over and wanting to fix what is broken; they are just as harmful. Let us be patient with ourselves and one another, and by being diligent in love let us prepare the royal highway. Amen.