



11/15/2020 Wise Hearts Seek God

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; Psalm 90:1-8 [9-11] 12; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

Covid-19 has left many a family scarred with heart-breaking grief. Many have lost their ability to feed their families. Much anguish and mental distress has increased cases of domestic abuse and family break-ups. Life, as we knew it, has been disrupted and there is no end in sight. The new normal will not stay normal for long and whatever the world will be able to re-build will still be a reflection of the physical, emotional, and social challenges we are undergoing now.

However, not all is negative. Hundreds of people have used their time, talents, and passions during the pandemic to start a new business.¹ Feyi Raimi-Abraham has used the time to start the Black Dementia Company (BDC). BDC creates items such as adult coloring books, puzzles, and calendars featuring Afro-Caribbean scenes. Paula Grady applied for over 500 jobs after a pandemic layoff; her frustrating and unsuccessful search led her to start a scented candle business in her own home studio called Osme Candles. Kim Brookes started a luxury scented jewelry company which features jewelry carrying essential oil fragrances for the wearer.

The rejection from hundreds of companies and the negative comments from those who told them they couldn't be successful, motivated these women to trust their previous life experience, their skill set, self-confidence, and tenacity.

When faced with traumatic news (a death in the family, the loss of a job, the end of a relationship, or discouraging medical test results) we all individually have our way of responding. The overwhelming grief may manifest itself in numbness and lack of energy, in sadness and a sense of disorientation. The ample skills we have demonstrated in other areas of our life may simply fail to show up in those critical moments and we are left with a feeling of inadequacy and emptiness. In those traumatic moments life ceases to have

¹ <https://www.ktnv.com/rebound/hiring-during-coronavirus/people-starting-new-businesses-during-the-pandemic>



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meaning and nothing seems to appeal. One is left with feeling dead inside: why go on?

I have felt that way at times, I have experienced helplessness and hopelessness. I have known moments of despair. I have reached the bottom. In those moments, my only prayer was: “God, take me.”

But that, I quickly felt in my guts, would be an easy way out. It would not be the way of a disciple. It would not show trust in the love of God, the faith necessary to put our life in God’s hands, and the confident hope that God is capable of creating new things out of chaos.

Today’s scriptures carry a rebuke to the faithless. The prophet Zephaniah denounces the hypocrisy of Jerusalem and the anger of the landlord towards the third servant in the gospel parable highlights one’s inability to break free of fear. The punishment in both stories is self-inflicted. A life of short-sighted fear denies big-picture hope and active, bold love. The wrath of God is nothing but the denunciation of the small life we choose to have at times. To avoid risks, we avoid blessings instead. One can almost hear God screaming:

“DON’T DO THAT! DON’T HOLD YOURSELF BACK. DON’T WASTE YOUR POTENTIALS.”

What God has so generously given us is not meant to be tucked away, buried, protected. Because the risk is powerfully great: One could lose it all.

But if we stay with the pain brought up by the difficult experience, if we embrace the cross, if we stay true to ourselves, we’ll discover inner resources we thought we couldn’t reach or had lost. Those resources will move us forward and we will feel renewed hope and the joy of the master.



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What we hear in today's gospel is a parable about grace. It is about God's amazing and abundant gifts which are meant to be received as a hidden treasure, cradled in gratitude, and always to be shared. When grace received is buried and not shared, it simply dies. Grace begins with unburying that which God has given us and taking a long look at it and wondering at where and how and with whom God has called us to share.

Sometimes that comes easily. And sometimes, or better, often, it is the grueling, difficult, but ultimately life-giving work of personal digging. It is self-work aided by the grace of God that brings enlightenment and healing. It is part of the personal journey, the personal commitment to self-discovery and desire to grow and improve as an individual, as a person in relationships, and as a member of society. Resisting this self-work we succumb to complacency. We become old inside, dry up and wither.

We need God to intervene in our life. And God intervenes through those God puts around us.

We need others. We need their feedback even when it hurts, even when it comes from our enemies. That's the reason Jesus commands us to love them all, even as we'd rather close up and push them away. If we are strong and perseverant enough to withstand the fire, nuggets of gold can be revealed: we gain new perspectives on ourselves and realize that all is grace. God yelling at us through even our enemies may stop us in our tracks from inflicting more self-wounds and from harming others in our self-hatred acts. Yes, because when we harm others, we think we are seeking our best interests but in reality we are expressing the worst of us.

That's why God scolds those who are convinced to be in the right and plan to celebrate a merciful God while at the same time afflicting their neighbors. In the words of Zephaniah: "Hush before the Lord Yahweh. For the Day of



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the Lord is at hand!” That Day may come as a ton of bricks to those who do not repent of their death-dealing ways or as a moment of blessing and self-discovery for those who want to know where they went wrong and want to change their ways. This is what distinguishes those who shrink before God and those who grow as human beings.

We need to be in relationships where we are valued, believed in, encouraged to find and express our true self, and challenged to tweak and refine our talents so we may best serve others. We need to be in righteous relationships, that is, relationships where others are valued, appreciated, celebrated; relationships where there is a mutual give and take, where the partners look at each other with understanding and eagerness, with compassion and forgiveness, where all are treated equally and fairly.

But it all starts with me. Hear the words of Pope Francis:

“Rivers do not drink their own water.

Trees do not eat their own fruit.

The sun does not shine on itself and

Flowers do not spread their fragrance for themselves.

Living for others is a rule of nature.

We are all born to help each other

No matter how difficult it is...

Life is good when you are happy

But much better when others are happy because of you.”

Love is what allows us to be ourselves, to seek the God-given treasure in us that is a gift for ourselves and others. Love is always letting go of a fear. Yet,



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we have become very proficient at justifying our fears and avoiding simple love. The world will always teach us fear. Jesus will always command us to love. We can retreat in fear or we can go out of ourselves in love. And when we seek the spiritual good of another, we at last forget our fears and ourselves.

For this we need a wise heart. What is a wise heart? One that turns away from human attempts at self-deception and self-justification and makes room for God. May we seek and find, may we ask and receive. Amen.