

“Going Forward Together, With Thankfulness and Hope” by Trish Nemore



Icon of the Resurrection by the hand of Thomas Xenakis

May 17, 2020

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Our five previous sermons of the Easter season, it seems to me, are all of a piece, offering us tools and ways of thinking that we need to continue to **live and move forward** in the age of the corona virus pandemic. From Marjory: **Don't be afraid and Follow your call**; from Erica: **Be radically honest**; from Dave: **Notice that Jesus might be walking right beside you**; from Mark: **Wail loudly about the hurts and injustices that you and the world experience and expect to be listened to,**

and, from Brenda: **Remember that the Body of Christ is us – mismatched, flawed, throw away stones that we are.**

This morning, I'd like to continue the conversation about moving forward, a phrase the importance of which came to me one morning about a month ago when I, too, realized that "going back" or "returning to normal" was not something that any of us should aspire to.

The phrase "going forward" became bright to me as the right language for this moment after hearing the poem *Easter 2020* that Erin Bush read at the Vita Poetica event of last month and that Sandra Miller brought to us as the peace and justice prayer a few weeks ago. The poem, by Mike Croghan, includes these lines:

*You can't uncrack an egg
Or uncrash your car
You can't unkiss that girl
Or unspeak those words
You can't unspread a virus
Or undo what it's done to us all*

And then, the final lines:

*You can't go back
But we, together, can go forward.*

Let's talk about going forward together, with thankfulness and hope.

I want to start with thankfulness or gratitude. Gratitude is a tricky concept for me because, while I am honestly grateful and do express gratitude for so many things, my life is very comfortable and stable and it is easy to be grateful when I have everything I need and much more. Every time I get into my nearly 21- year-old raggedy-looking VW Passat station-wagon with the confidence that it is going to take me where I need

to go, I am grateful, And grateful, too, for the knowledge that if my car does fall apart, I will be able either to get it fixed or to buy another. So this sort of gratitude seems a bit shallow to me – not nothing but not all that deep, either. I need more practice in finding gratitude in moments of events or happenings that are difficult and painful – like the chaos and suffering in the world that is affecting virtually every single person on the planet right now

I find useful the words of David Stendl-Rast, the Benedictine monk who has spoken widely about gratitude, He says we are not called to be grateful for everything given (war, death, and I'll add, the coronavirus) but to look for gratitude in every moment. That distinction is helpful to me. I don't know about you but I get a knot in my stomach reading the news every day. Stories with headlines like: "Disputing the Death Toll to Score Political Points"; "Moneyed Conservative Nexus Helps Fuel Shutdown Protests"; "Questions of Bias in Virus Care Haunt Mourning Black Families"; "Banks Steered Richest Clients to Federal Aid"; "Stigma of Health Work Incites Bloodshed in some Countries"; "As Medical Workers Bear the Unbearable, the Burnout is Smouldering", and "Gasping for Breaths the Size of a Tablespoon". And that's just the ones about corona virus. So many other horrors as well, like: "We Almost Didn't Hear About Ahmaud Arbery."

I don't have to be grateful for the stories that fuel these headlines but I am very grateful for the reporters who continue to do their jobs during this time to expose the greed, the manipulation, the racism, the playing politics with death, the violence against important workers, the inevitable burnout of front line workers, as well as the complexities of the disease itself and the horrors of its symptoms. And perhaps I should even be grateful for the knots in my stomach by the way they tell me that maybe I do still care about all the suffering and human perfidy that seems to engulf the world.

I can be grateful, too, for the myriad ways this virus has laid bare day after day, evening news after evening news (Hurrah for the PBS News hour) the deplorable way our economy and so-called safety net fail the people who, it turns out, are most essential to our lives. An EMT without health insurance? HOW CAN THAT BE?

A tiny personal example of Stendl-Rast's distinction between not having to be grateful for everything but finding gratitude in every moment came for me earlier this week when I woke up with tightening in my throat and chest unfamiliar from previous colds or bouts of the flu. A bit unnerving in the era of Corona virus. Not grateful for that. But when I emailed my doctor at 6:50 am, I received a response in four minutes and was directed to come in for an evaluation as soon as I could. Gratitude for that incredibly speedy response and for the care I received at Kaiser. My time at Kaiser was stressful but productive (I found out the next day that I tested negative for Covid-19). My already great appreciation and gratitude for our health care workers was enhanced by this up-close and personal experience. Though my breathing was never terribly difficult, I had a little better understanding of the notion of "gasping for breaths the size of a tablespoon" and was grateful for my even constricted lung capacity.

Practicing gratitude, according to Stendl-Rast requires us to pause, to behold and listen and then to act. Some of us not on the front lines certainly have lots of opportunities at this moment in time to pause and behold. I hear from our gathering time on Sunday mornings and I see on Facebook that many of us are pausing and beholding aspects of nature – and acting by sharing with the rest of us beautiful photographs of gardens, of birds, of discoveries made on walks in the woods. What other actions do our beholdings, our listenings move us toward? In my personal life, my thankfulness for all my creature comforts, I hope, spurs me to share them with others.

As with all our efforts at regular practices, sometimes I am more successful than others. And I hope that my noticing, that our noticing of the deplorable failings of our political and economic systems will spur us to political action.

We don't have to be grateful for everything given but we are called to find gratitude in every moment.

Although I haven't figured out how to put words to it, I am confident that gratitude has something to do with hopefulness. Perhaps it is that gratitude opens our hearts a little bit to lessen our fears and so allows us to open up to possibilities and thus to hope. Our Easter liturgy reflection tells us that we Christians don't ignore bad news, don't pave over tragedy and suffering with platitudes but live in defiant hope.

I love that reflection. *This is a faith that produces a defiant hope that God is still writing the story. . .* This is a faith that asks us to see what we don't want to see and hear what we don't want to hear and still carry on, with hope. It sounds so right. And it's so challenging.

Frankly, I don't really know how to live into the challenge of these words. I do believe they state the essence of the spiritual journey – to learn to live our lives with joy and purpose and hope while acknowledging, while *feeling* all the tragedy in the world, including that caused by our own failings – and I really don't know how to do it. I prefer to find all the stories of goodness and focus on those, not the tragedies, to acknowledge the incredible work of all our essential workers – the truck drivers, EMTs, grocery workers, nurses, doctors and on and on – *without fully feeling* the pain and horror and despair that many of them must feel each day as they carry on meeting our needs: it's finally made the news in this morning's story about burnout on the front lines: "There is a wave of depression, letdown, true PTSD and a feeling of not caring anymore that is coming". I just want to cheer them

on, be grateful that they are putting their lives and possibly those of their family members at risk to help the world. And that's not a bad thing – being grateful for their work and cheering them on. But still. . .

I'm relatively safe in my lovely house, walking daily in my lovely neighborhood.

I don't really know how to bridge the cavernous gap, with joy, thanksgiving, deep feeling and hope, between my comfort and the world's suffering.

What I do know is that there is tremendous goodness in people – us, we rejected, mismatched, throwaway stones – that shows up every single day everywhere. Even with all our flaws, our propensities to violence and greed and just plain meanness sometimes, even with the colossal failures of our institutions to meet the challenges before us. And that's what's reported in the media – all the ways we fail as individual human beings and in the institutions we create. The media doesn't report good news, at least not much. As soon as you read a story of promising developments in solving a problem, the next story is about cutthroat competition and infighting as to who gets credit and, well, no, it's not really very promising after all. Perhaps we should be glad that the media doesn't report "good news". Perhaps the absence of a lot of "positive stories" suggests that they are not News. Perhaps our goodness, our decency, our kindness are the norm, the backdrop, unremarkable because they are commonplace and not "newsworthy".

I know they are commonplace because I observe evidence of it every day. Angels in our midst. I know this is true of Seekers. Each of us has been the giver or receiver or both of someone else's kindness. The one who picks you up in the middle of the night to take you to the ER, the one who makes food for you when that's hard for you to do for yourself, the one who finds help for you with the new technology you're

struggling with. You know what I am saying is true. To borrow a phrase from my favorite President, Barack Obama, we are “alive to one another’s struggles.” We are all wounded healers – we give and we receive and even in our need, our need to receive the kindness of another, we are offering the gift to that person of serving, of being useful.

And what we see working in the world right now – more vividly because of the dire straights we are in – is the incredible energy, ingenuity, and take charge-ness of individuals who, lacking a strong national leader to guide them, are creating what is needed and helping each other. Billy Amoss told us of his son Phil’s hard work at distributing PPE made by a friend who, on his own, without directive from political leadership, converted a factory from making high end custom pieces for movie and theatre sets, among other things, to making PPE. We are warmed by and applaud that spirit of ingenuity and generosity even as we are saying HOW CAN THIS BE? How can our government be failing us so monumentally? Why is it that individuals all over the country need to be stepping in to fill a leadership void? A piece I read on-line recently noted that *“The leadership is coming from the ground up. Millions of individuals are expressing their compassion, making sacrifices, and displaying incredible courage and heroism.”*

Indeed.

It is to the goodness of people, the angels all around us, the energy and ingenuity and take charge-ness that I look for the **defiant hope** that lets us carry on in the midst of tragedy.

I know. I know. It feels like a teaspoon of mercy in an ocean of injustice, perfidy and suffering. A person very dear to me recently said that despite doing all the “Right Things” to take care of themselves in this difficult time – hiking, meditating, journaling, playing with their kids – there is no authentic hope or joy in the things they are doing. Maybe that’s true of many of us right now. And yet we know, as my

dear one says, that if we wait it out without causing too much damage, we'll find our way back to real hope and joy. And in the meantime, we have each other. We have fierce caring and burning desires to create a better future. We have ingenuity and creativity and kindness. **This** is what we have and it matters. A lot.

And, so, how then do we go forward? Here's what I wrote on my Easter egg:

My hope is that those whose hearts and minds have been broken open with appreciation for health care workers, grocery clerks, postal carriers and others keeping us going in dangerous times will turn that appreciation into political action to strengthen how our economy and society support everyone.

I fervently hope that. And, even though I find strength and hope in the "leadership from the ground up," I do not believe that the changes needed to our economy and our social structures are possible without a change in the White House. Whatever defiant hope I have right now is undergirded by a personal commitment to write letters on a regular basis to reluctant voters encouraging them to vote in November. Pat and I give small amounts of money each month to various political candidates whose values we share. Pat says "I regard political giving as an expression of prayer and hope".

Still, even with a White House and a Congress committed to the work of eliminating the vast inequities in our political and economic systems, our institutions will continue to fall short. We'll continue to be disappointed, even if they are shaped by and filled with people whose values we share. But we can't start to get there if we don't fight to make changes like everyone's lives depend on it – as they do. ***My defiant hope is that our gratitude for the blatant exposure by coronavirus of the consequences of inequalities in our society will give us the courage and energy for that fight.***

Going forward starts right now. Each day we are going forward into the world that exists right now. People are beginning to think about how the next iteration of our world might look different – permanently. Brenda shared a few articles about this in several recent “Resources” emails.

What new habits or practices will you take with you, from your time in this moment – the depths of the coronavirus era? Personally, I hope to retain my willingness to take walks a few times a day and to get on the phone with friends and family even though I don’t like talking on the phone, perhaps grocery shop less frequently, requiring less use of my car. Kindness is more prevalent when people perceive they have the time to stop and care for someone. I hope I can be more aware of whether the “thing I must do right now” is really as urgent as I like to make it.

And what can we, as Seekers community, take from this time into our new reality? A concrete example I observe is our ever more honed abilities to meet on Zoom. Based on the success of the Resurrection Class, Learners and Teachers is recognizing that we can do at least some classes on Zoom even when we are able to gather together. This is hugely helpful to those unable to travel at night. Too, our ever resourceful Celebration Circle is noodling about how we might continue to make worship available outside of our physical space, even when we are able to return to that space. It’s so lovely to know that friends far away are with us on Sundays.

What do we need to go forward together? We need big imaginations and bold ideas. Let’s start now the imagining into being of the world we want to live into as we gradually move away from the dire restrictions that currently govern our lives. What can we see differently? The world needs our ideas and imaginations. The world needs you and me.

May it be so.

Amen.