

I was asked to give a homily today, which is an explanation of scripture. The scripture today is “Kindness” by Naomi Shihab Nye Edited):

Before you know what kindness really is

You must lose things,

Feel the future dissolve in a moment

Like salt in a weakened broth.

What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved,

All this must go so you know

How desolate the landscape can be

between the regions of kindness.

...

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,

you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

You must wake up with sorrow.

You must speak to it til your voice

Catches the thread of all sorrows

And you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,

only kindness that ties your shoes

and sends you out into the day to mail letters and

purchase bread,

only kindness that raises its head

from the crowd of the world to say

it is I you have been looking for,

and then goes with you every where
like a shadow or a friend.

As Naomi Nye says, we must first know our sorrow. We are just now emerging from a time of great sadness and fear. There have been many dark nights of grinding boredom, deep grief, helpless rage, and fear. Trigger warning, this gets pretty raw before it turns out OK.

Boredom: Stuck in isolation, the lack of interaction for many of us threw us into a darkness whereby we were just surviving. It often felt like we were scabbling animals searching for some small advantage in vegetables or paper goods. Some of my clients were doing okay until forced into isolation, where the lack of people who recognized them as meaningful human beings and the lack of correction for inflated fearful or self-destructive thoughts sucked them into tornadoes of fear and depression. A few preferred Zoom but many felt the flat responses of Zoom were a dreadful tease and cruel disappointment. For American adults generally, anxiety and depression quadrupled, suicide and alcoholism rates soared, half of parents noticed a new or worsening mental health condition for their teenagers, and half of all adults report that the pandemic has worsened their stress.

Grief: We lost congregants, friends, and family members. Daily, we anticipated death notices, obituaries, and rising numbers of suffering humans that seemed unstoppable. I was at times struck dumb with mourning these losses or tears welled up unexpectedly. Grief was a stealthy rat in the corner.

Rage: Burdened by deceitful withholding of information, lies, and absurd assertions, we were put in grave danger by an uncaring President and his violent followers. Helpless rage was sometimes unavoidable as the lies and deliberate negligence continued day after day after day . . .

Fear: was a steady drumbeat of doom in the background. We could not escape the nagging anticipation that touching THIS or breathing NOW could expose us to infection, suffering, and death. Meaning seemed to fade in the desolate gloom of a thousand “what ifs.” As the economy barreled toward a cliff and fifty thousand Americans contracted Covid each day, our game-plans for life wilted.

But I do not list our sadness, fear, and anger to depress us, but to note that—having been wounded this way—we have a truth to live in this world. Our anger and damage and grief are our way to kindness. We know how we have

suffered and that others have suffered likewise, so that what we need they probably need as well. We meet to honor the truth that kindness lives.

Sometimes, we have been lost in canyons of despair but NOW we can speak with each other to recognize we strive for more than survival. We strive for the meaning that kindness gives us all. We have, right here, in collecting together this day, the stubborn hope that if we show up and do the right thing for each other, and for others who are still hurting, that kindness will bloom. We have waited and watched and worked—we did not give up. We are ready to give and receive. We are ready to join the many counterbalancing acts of staggering generosity and humanity that also live vigorously in this world. All over, from flower box to cathedral, from your pet cat to refugees fleeing oppression, this is a turning point if we simply step up our commitment to listening, soothing, validating, receiving, and encouraging kindness. As Mark Morford put it: “believe you are part of a groundswell, a resistance, a seemingly small but actually very, very large impending karmic overhaul, a great shift, the beginning of something important and potent and unstoppable” that is kind. Again, Naomi Nye’s last stanza:

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