

Christmas Eve Homily 2017
The Rev. Devon Anderson
Luke 2: 1-20

The Revolution of Tenderness

“It’s Christmas Eve. And now could be the moment when we fall apart, or we become whole.”

*On the mountain tonight the full moon
faces the full sun.
Now could be the moment
when we fall apart, or we become whole.
Our time seems to be up – I think I even hear it stopping.
Then why have we kept up the singing for so long?
Because that’s the sort of determined creature we are.
Before us, our first task is to astonish,
and then, harder by far, to be astonished.*

This lovely poem by Galway Kinnell presses, ever so gently, on the heartbeat of Christmas. Because Christmas Eve seems, every year, to be the moment when we fall apart, or we become whole. It is on this night – more than any other - that we greet the fork in the road – one way a path toward despair, the other way, hope. One way harsh, the other, tender.

It may be a universal truth that Christmas is a messy affair – a combination of both celebration and heartache, quiet and flurry, peace and discord, both healing and hurt. Gatherings of family or friends usually have some combination of coming together *and* breaking apart, seasonal gaiety entwined with relational complexities: old resentments, generational tensions, or the ache of longing for loved ones no longer with us. I find a great deal of comfort in knowing that no family is unique in this way. It’s Christmas’ nature to evoke dueling realities of both suffering and hope.

I also find comfort that Christmas has *always* been this way – a jumble of mess and grace. Our Gospels tell us the story of Mary and Joseph, whose lives are, in no uncertain terms, a disaster. Mary is pregnant. Joseph is not the father. They are engaged, but not married. The two must travel windy, thief-infested roads from Nazareth to Joseph’s hometown of Bethlehem. And yet no one from Joseph’s family opens their home to them. Is it shame? Denial? Estrangement? There’s nowhere to go, no one to help. Looming over it all is the long, threatening shadow of the Roman Empire – whose steely boot presses down on the neck of the people. These are scary, uncertain times. The people are unhinged and frightened. Darkness and worry overwhelms.

And yet, into these shifting sands an infant is born – God’s then-and-forever response to the mess of humanity. God doesn’t come with the great imposing power of an army or a monarch. God doesn’t come as a natural disaster, in the form of wind or fire or wave, to wipe the world clean. God comes instead as a whisper – quietly, and without judgment or condemnation. God’s answer to brokenness is, in all simplicity, *tenderness*. God sent the occupied territories of first century Palestine, tenderness. God sent the forsaken Mary and Joseph, tenderness. And tonight, 2000 years later, God sends us

tenderness, incarnate in Jesus -- here, as always, in this place, on this night -- to pat our knee, bind up our wounds, and set us free.

I experience God's choice of tenderness as brilliant and creative. Who would have thought that it would be tenderness that would change the course of human history? Who would have guessed that it's tenderness -- and not cleverness -- that has enough power to end division and reconcile warring factions? Who could have imagined that simple tenderness is strong enough to bring about deep change and transformation?

I've been chewing on this idea about tenderness for several months. It started right at the beginning of my sabbatical in June when I happened on-line upon a piece by the Arab American poet Naomi Shihab Nye. Though not very long, the poem reads more like a short story. And it's about tenderness as a determined energy that, once unleashed, breaks down barriers and brings people together.

The scene is an airport and Nye is waiting for her flight when the gate agent announces a 4-hour delay. In the gate area, Nye views an older woman, in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, begin to wail and crumple to the floor. "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic," pleads the agent, "please come to the desk immediately." Nye approaches, puts her arm around the sobbing grandma, and speaks as best she can in her halting Arabic. Nye discovers that the woman thought the flight had been cancelled, and panicked because she needs to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. "No," Nye assures her, "we're fine. You'll get there, just later." Then Nye sits with the woman and calls the woman's son on her cell phone. And then, just for the heck of it, they call all the woman's other sons. And then, they call Nye's father, and the two speak for awhile in rapid Arabic and, of course, discover they have ten shared friends.

"She was laughing a lot by then," writes Nye. "Telling of her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade *marmool* cookies -- little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts -- from her bag -- and was offering them to everyone at the gate. To my amazement not a single person declined. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo -- we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie."

"...I looked around that gate," observes Nye, "of late and weary ones and I thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate -- once the crying of confusion stopped -- seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those people, too." "This can still happen anywhere," Nye concludes, "Not everything is lost." If we have ears to hear it, tenderness has been making a comeback of late. I hear it referred to in newscasts and newspapers, in performing arts, in interviews and in polite conversation -- and not just in church. In April of this year, a large TED talk conference gathered in Vancouver, Canada to hear presentations on the topic of "The Future You." In the middle of the conference an announcement was made that a "very, very special guest" would be joining them via satellite. Down came an enormous screen, and on it appeared Pope Francis from his modest apartment in the Vatican. The Pope gave an 18-minute talk calling for a "revolution of tenderness," needed to foster "togetherness" during a time of political upheaval all over the globe. Citing the plagues of our time as climate change, the immigration crisis, global inequities, and prevailing despair, the Pope said this:

To Christians, the future does have a name and its name is Hope...Hope is the virtue of a heart that doesn't lock itself into darkness, that doesn't dwell on the past, does not simply get by in the present, but is able to see a tomorrow...Hope is a humble, hidden seed of life that, with time, will develop into a large tree...And it can do so much, because a tiny flicker of light that feeds on hope is enough to shatter the shield of darkness. A single individual is enough for hope to exist. And that individual can be you. And then there will be another 'you,' and another 'you,' and it turns into an 'us.' And so, does hope begin when we have an 'us'? No. Hope began with one 'you'. When there is an 'us,' there begins a revolution. [And that revolution] is the revolution of tenderness....Tenderness means to use our hands and our heart to comfort the other, to take care of those in need....[Tenderness is] being on the same level as the other. God himself descended into Jesus, the Pope remarked, to be on our level... Yes, tenderness is the path of choice for the strongest, most courageous men and women. Tenderness is not weakness; it is fortitude. It is the path of solidarity, the path of humility...The future of humankind isn't exclusively in the hands of politicians, of great leaders, of big companies. Yes, they do hold an enormous responsibility. But the future is, most of all, in the hands of those people who recognize the other as a 'you' and themselves as part of an 'us.'

God sends tenderness into the mess that is humanity to bring us together, to bind the wounds of the world, and finally, because it is tenderness - and tenderness alone -that brings about transformation. Father Greg Boyle has ministered to and among gang members in Los Angeles for over 30 years. In his early years he focused his ministry around a simple motto: "Nothing stops a bullet like a job." His idea was that if recovering gang members had gainful employment, everything else would fall in line. But as soon as the first roadblock or challenge presented itself to a recovering gang member, time and again, everything would fall apart. Jobs, on their own, didn't bring about the kind of deep recovery and transformation that was necessary. Gang members had absolutely no chance of navigating their lives going forward without healing. A job wasn't enough. So Father Boyle, and his Delores Mission, the poorest Catholic Church in LA, set about building "Homeboy Industries" – a series of businesses (farmers markets, silk-screening and print shops, cafes) to both employ but also to surround participants with an "irresistible culture of tenderness – a place of containment where people kind of hold each other." What Homeboy found was that persistent and uncompromising tenderness sets about the deep work of transformation and healing.

And so, it's Christmas Eve. And like Christmas Eve last year, and the year before, and the one 2000 years ago – things are a bit of a mess. And here's the Christmas message: It. Doesn't. Matter. Christmas is, ultimately, about brokenness – mine, yours, the world's. And into the whole broken mess, on this night, God's response is tenderness. Tenderness because it heals and transforms. Tenderness because it soothes and calms and brings out the best in all people. Tenderness because in its presence our defenses come down and we can connect with other people. Tenderness because it requires courage and creativity and vulnerability.

Now is the moment that we fall apart, or – if only for this one night – we are made whole. May God's Peace be yours this holy, sacred night.

AMEN.

Sources:

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“Revolution of Tenderness,” Pope Francis TED talk, April 25, 2017.

“Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship,” by Father Gregory Boyle and also Father Boyle’s interview by Terri Gross on Fresh Air, November 13, 2017,

<https://www.npr.org/2017/11/13/563734736/priest-responds-to-gang-members-lethal-absence-of-hope-with-jobs-and-love>