

9 Sept., 2007
Fr. Richard L. Green

Yes, it's still good to be back. As you may notice, I am not Bishop Warner. If you are unaware, he did have to have heart surgery and unfortunately is not able to be with us today for his very last Episcopal visitation.

This last three-month stint that I had off was great. It was relaxing and all those things but as the days go by I'm realizing that there was more to it than just getting a nice little rest. That what it has allowed me to do is bigger than just not be so tired.

And it's still unfolding and it's still at work but the process actually began even before we officially took off those three months. In the spring, Kathleen and I went up to Dumas Bay and we went to a retreat that was focused on Celtic spirituality. I made some references to this earlier on. It was led by Philip Newell, who's a minister of the Church of Scotland. [He] is a wonderful writer and is quite a scholar and theologian as well. He's the whole package wrapped up all together. In his book, Celtic Benediction, which is a daybook of morning and evening prayers, he has a prayer that I would like to share with you to set the tone of what I feel is happening.

Let us pray.

In the morning light, oh God, may I glimpse again your image deep within me
The threads of eternal glory, woven into the fabric of every man and woman.
Again may I catch sight of the mystery of the human soul
Fashioned in your likeness.
Deeper than knowing, more enduring than time.
And in glimpsing these threads of light amidst the weakness and distortions of my life,
Let me be recalled to the strength and beauty deep in my soul.
Let me be recalled to the strength and beauty of your image in every living soul.
Amen.

That prayer – and his writings are full of this kind of thing – that prayer really brought home again that this whole enterprise that we're engaged in is about remembering. About remembering who we are and whose we are and at some deep level, *what* we are. Our daily lives, with all of the distractions that we create for ourselves, our fears, our scar tissue, our memories, our possessions, our self-images, our feelings of unworthiness, of inadequacy, our arrogance. All of this mess that we call personality.

All of this, the good, the bad and the ugly, is distracting unless we make a conscious effort to look beneath all that **stuff**. A lot of it is simply baggage that comes from living life. We pack it around and it's all part of that stuff that, you know, the camel through the eye of the needle thing, it's all part of the weight that we carry. And for the most part a lot of it doesn't affect us all that much as long as it just sort of floats there on the surface. But we become identified with it and it gets in the way of that connection with

our soul, which as Philip Newell said is 'related in the image of God which carries the divine spark'. It's our connection to God.

All the things that get in the way of that memory, that reality – all that stuff – is superfluous. It's idolatrous. It's adulterous. It's all of those things that separate us from our true nature. It's what separates us from reality, separates us from the delusions and illusions we have of reality.

We get distracted and homed in on that, thinking that that's what's real, when what's really real is that down at our core there is the likeness of God that's deeper than knowing and more enduring than time. When we get in touch with that, we receive an empowerment and a liberation that's beyond anything rational. It's beyond what we think we are capable of, it's beyond what we think we deserve, but there it is. And over the course of this sabbatical that kind of got stirred up in me again.

Having all the busy-ness and my self-images and all my roles and all the stuff that I was packing around - being able to just set that aside was wonderful. And it started with nine days out at Ann Mottet's cabin on Willapa Bay, thankyouverymuch. And it took me several days just to get in touch with how tired I was! But in that quiet, in that silence with no obligations other than keep breathing and don't burn the house down, amazing things began and continue.

I found that was such an image as I continued in some of my reading. I'm reading a book by Diana Butler Bass and books by Jim Marion and I went to a class with Marcus Borg and Dom Crossan and sitting at the beach in Texas and sitting at the beach in Manhattan Beach and sitting at the beach in Laguna Beach and...

It's just that coming back into connection is so amazing. Lightening, grounding, empowering. I realize that every thing that we do, **every** thing that we do in our lives is an opportunity. As nice as it is, we can do this and not be on Manhattan Beach in L.A. We don't have to go into retreat. But if we look at our dally activities in ways that they are spiritual practices – doing the dishes, going to work, doing the laundry, or being on altar guild or playing in the bell choir or being a priest or a deacon or a kid in Sunday School or an acolyte. All of these are real opportunities to just go in there – they're meditations and we can use that to learn about ourselves, to begin to step back.

We can find the ways, some room in there to move back from some of those preconceptions about the nature of reality. [That] sounds like a lot of philosophical mumbo-jumbo but it's really cutting to the chase. It's looking underneath surface just a little bit.

There are all these opportunities. Every moment is an opportunity, every breath we take. Sometimes opportunities are imposed on us. Sometimes life presents us with circumstances that simply knock all the stuffing out of us, slap us down, take everything away from us.

That I think is where Jesus was going in the gospel today. Isn't it great, my first sermon since I've been on sabbatical, what are the propers Hate your family! Give away everything!

But I think what he's talking about there in his own use of hyperbole to get our attention is this attachment thing. Give away all. Lose all our possessions. We get so identified with things and self-images and the things that we possess, well, the truth is that they really possess us. They own us. Anything we're afraid of losing owns us and actually becomes an idol. So we have to carry all things, even relationships, lightly. Because even though at the time they seem like they'll go on forever, we don't know. We really don't know, so we have to carry all things lightly.

Today we're going to collect the loose offering for St. Paul's Church in New Orleans as part of our *We Will Stand With You* commitment. And we'll send that offering in Bishop Warner's name, in thanksgiving for his ministry.

But those folks down in New Orleans were reminding me of how life can impose itself. It can take away all of our self-images and all of our possessions, all of the things we hold dear and leave us standing there, wondering what hit us. In fact, who am I? If I'm not the one who lives at a certain address and has a certain car and goes to a certain church, then who am I?

At last year's diocesan convention, Father Will Hood, who was at that time the priest in charge but now has been called as the rector of St. Paul's in New Orleans, offered as part of one of his theological reflections the following observation:

He said to the convention, "You know, I live in that crazy-making place, New Orleans. And you've seen us, and you've been at the table. I've heard you say over and over, 'We admire your courage.' Yeah. Is that another way of saying, 'Are you really as nuts as you look?' Beloved, you've got to understand something: I am the one who is blessed. Do you understand that? I live with a desperate people. I am the congregation and I am blessed to live with a desperate people. You see, Katrina came through and wiped away a lot of pretense and a lot of arrogance and a lot of church crazy-making. I'm blessed."

Sometimes when life does to you what Katrina did to the people of the Gulf Coast – it might be the death of a spouse, it might be losing a job, it might be your house burns down; it might be a thousand things that seem just horrible - right underneath that is *freedom*. There's liberation from an enslavement that makes what happened to the slave friend of Paul's in that letter to Philemon look like nothing.

It can give us a chance for just a moment, even, to look beneath all of that baggage, all that accretion of stuff and see maybe just even for a moment who we really are, what we really are and whose we really are.

Now, I had the easy version of that, just by going on sabbatical. That was a piece of cake. But we all know, because we've all experienced somehow, some way, losing it all. With some it's more dramatic than others, but we've all had those experiences where it seems like 'I can't go on from here without' whatever it is we've lost. And yet if we're willing to stand there, beat up, naked, sobbing and *free* – life can be transformed.

That's not to downplay at all the importance that things and relationships and self-images play in our lives, but there is so much more than just that that makes up our deepest and truest identity. The only way we ever get an opportunity to get in touch with that is going to be somehow to move beyond and underneath all of that stuff.

Let me be recalled to the strength and beauty deep in my soul.

Let me be recalled to the strength and beauty of your image in every living soul.

Amen.