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St. Thomas Church
6.28.20; Pent. 4A
Jer. 28:5-9; Rom. 6:12-23;
Matt. 10:40-42

Welcoming the Prophet

To fully appreciate today's tiny, three verse gospel lesson, we need to know the backstory. Jesus has given his disciples everything they will need before they march for peace and justice: healing powers, assurance of his love, provision and perfect timing, and the courage to face opposition and even persecution. The disciples are given a special weapon to add to their arsenal of love--to welcome everything and everyone who welcomes him.

“Surely there must be more to it?” I asked. I have searched the internet on a regular basis for some weeks now—looking for the perfect psychological test, self-help inventory, survey, or measurement that can help shed some light on how I can generate more energy, more courage, more something to get through all of this. To my surprise, I discovered that I wasn't looking in the right place. The answer, at least for me, was found through changing the way I pray. What follows is a prayer that comes out of the rich contemplative prayer tradition by way of the late Thomas Keating.

It's a prayer that I have avoided on many occasions because it seems so impossible, but I have come to trust it as the truest and most reliable indication of how well I am doing physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It is known as the welcoming prayer and I invite you to try it on this morning.

Welcome, welcome, welcome.

I welcome everything that comes to me today
because I know it's for my healing.

I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons,
situations, and conditions.

I let go of my desire for power and control.

I let go of my desire for affection, esteem,
approval and pleasure.
I let go of my desire for survival and security.
I let go of my desire to change any situation,
condition, person or myself.
I open to the love and presence of God and
God's action within. Amen

I am wondering if any of you might feel as I do—that you probably wouldn't have passed Jesus' spiritual fitness test. If I am perfectly honest, I have found a lot to not welcome these last three and a half months—including this mask I am wearing now while I try to preach. Many days, I feel like I am fortunate if I have enough energy and strength to fulfil my normal and usual responsibilities at home and at work. To find time to truly engage in the wider social issues seems overwhelming—and yet, and yet, Jesus continues to whisper in my ear—I never promised you that following me was going to be easy or comfortable.

I believe a healthy way to either begin or continue engagement with the social justice dimension of the gospel is to first strengthen our prayer lives. The spiritual principles behind the Welcoming Prayer are important for us to understand. The Welcoming Prayer is not advocating that we passively sit by watching horrible and destructive things being done to one another and this planet. However, it does point us to our work that needs to be done first before we act. This is especially important in these times in which many of us have received sharp, and even harsh, criticism for condoning (even benefiting) from inequalities in our society.

The Welcoming Prayer focuses our attention on acknowledging our emotions and thoughts (especially negative and charged ones) that comes from our own vulnerability and triggers. Through prayer we surrender our need to control things and the need to be in the right. It also helps us to resist being controlled or manipulated by forces outside

of us. Through the Welcoming Prayer, we affirm that God brings prophetic voices and difficult situations into our lives that we need to hear in order to grow and change.

The Welcoming Prayer promotes good psychology: if we do not first cultivate awareness of what is really going on in us, we are likely to project our unfinished work onto others (especially those who are different from us) and hurt them and ultimately ourselves. The Welcoming Prayer assists us in becoming “free and clear” to allow the wind of the Holy Spirit to propel us to do the kinds of compassionate things that God desires—not necessarily what we desire. It frees us up to respond to each moment as it comes and not react out of a place of shame or woundedness. And eventually, God always leads us to action. God sent his original disciples out into the mission field and so shall He with us.

I believe Jesus is calling you and me to welcome and invite into our hearts and inner social circles those who have the capacity to challenge us through prophetic messages, godly and righteous living, and commitment to help the most vulnerable even when it isn't convenient or seems too costly. I would like to share a story of what happens when you pray with an open heart and welcome a prophet into your life.

I met Jim McCloskey at Princeton Theological Seminary. We were classmates and instant friends. Jim was quite a bit older than me. He came from a white, middle class background much like many of us. If you met him at St. Thomas, you would think he fit right in. Jim had served as a captain in Viet Nam and had enjoyed a successful career as a business consultant. However, his life was at a crossroads. He had grown weary of the business world and was in search of a calling that would give him more purpose and meaning.

Not afraid of a good challenge, Jim felt led by God to apply for a student chaplaincy placement at none other than Trenton State Prison—a maximum security facility—the oldest continuously operating prison in

the country—with a similar aura and appearance as the prison used to film *Shawshank Redemption*. As you can imagine, this was not a popular field education placement at Princeton Seminary!

After a few months of ministering to some of the most dangerous inmates in New Jersey, Jim met a man who would change his life and start a movement through his prophetic voice. Chiefie De Los Santos was a recovering heroin addict serving a life sentence for a murder that he maintained that he did not commit. When Jim came to believe in his innocence, all his supervisor had to say was, “Kid, they all think they are innocent around here.”

Soon afterwards, Jim dropped out of seminary and used his tuition money to start investigating the case on his own with no legal or investigative training or experience. We had all thought that he had lost his mind and he thought we had lost our faith. Eventually Jim uncovered undeniable facts that proved that the state’s chief witness had perjured himself and Chiefie Del Los Santos was freed after serving nine years for a crime he never committed.

Jim went on to found Centurion Ministries, the first organization to focus on freeing the imprisoned innocent in our country. Since 1983 this organization has freed over 63 men and women of all ethnic backgrounds who were serving sentences for capital crimes they never committed. And has inspired numerous others to follow in their footsteps—including Jim’s friend and brother in Christ, Bryan Stevenson whose amazing book and movie *Just Mercy* we will be discussing on zoom as a congregation. All our invited!

Dear friends this is what happens when we pray with an open heart, cultivate an unfailing commitment to finding the truth and welcome in the prophet—even when the prophet doesn’t look, act, or have the same background as us. When all are welcome great things happen for the kingdom of God and for us!

I would like to close with a quote from Mary Mrozowski, the creator of the Welcoming Prayer.

"To welcome and to let go [of all that hinders us] is one of the most radically loving, faith-filled gestures we can make in each moment of each day. It is an open-hearted embrace of all that is in ourselves and in the world." Amen.