

Vespers Homily May 19, 2011

Margot Hover, D. Min.

I'm disobeying at least one cardinal rule tonight; instead of three points, I will tell you seven stories, hoping that we'll all be on the same page at the end.

Without a doubt, one of the funniest and most poignant plays in New York City is "Late Night Catechism." It is always performed in an old off-Broadway church basement. An elderly but still formidable Catholic sister in full pre-Vatican II garb is on a low stage set like a 1940's classroom; the audience sits on folding chairs. The story is that we, the audience, are attending evening classes so that we can prepare our children for the sacraments. Throughout the evening, Sister Mary engages the audience, as when she distributes holy cards and religious trinkets to all the parents with children in Catholic colleges. Early on, she calls out a standard catechism question, "Why did God make you?" to which the entire audience responds in unison, without prompting, "God made us to know, love and serve him in this world and to be happy with him in the next." There's a moment of stunned silence, as the audience realizes that everyone in that audience, regardless of denomination, has heard that catechism question at some point in their lives. It's remarkable how many Jews and Buddhists in New York know the Catholic catechism.

So when Sister Mary moves to the next page, the audience is somewhat prepared to recite the definition of a sacrament as "an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace." Some are able to list the Catholic sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Penance, Eucharist, Matrimony, Holy Orders, and Extreme Unction. In that gear, no one remembers that they're now called the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick.

Of course, I know that not all of our denominations have seven sacraments, but stay with me for a moment. I suspect that we all know in our hearts and bodies those holy parallel moments in the rhythm of daily life, especially daily life in a community of the type that Pilgrim Place professes—and sometimes struggles—to be. We know that rituals are a language of word and gesture that is intuitively used to mark universal realities that are too important for words alone. Pilgrim Place is rich with those realities and with rituals to mark them.

For example, as a new Pilgrim, I'm sensitive now to the various ways in which new members are initiated--Baptized. Of course, there's the introduction; think of the rituals attending that process. The introducer follows announcements; the inductees aren't supposed to say anything, but they may briefly acknowledge personal greetings in the Garden Café receiving line after dessert. My own formal introduction here by the Lambs truly felt like a Baptism, one that I shall always hold close to my heart. High Church Pilgrims will host teas for new Pilgrims, ending promptly at 9. Everyone remembers to say their own name when speaking to new Pilgrims for the first several weeks, for which I was soooo grateful. Baptism rituals – all.

And Confirmation is a celebration of God's Spirit within church members; in my church, it is thought of as arriving at adult faith. Here, at Pilgrim Place, confirmation

follows quickly on the heels of initiation, (in my case, before I first laid eyes on my apartment). New Pilgrims are greeted with, “We’re not supposed to ask you for a year, but we need you to—move furniture, become a chaplain, water plants, sort books, paint faces—more or less NOW.” Perhaps other confirmations come when Pilgrims present papers at the Doing Theology group or lead Eucharistic Circle or Vespers. One of my own, sometimes desperate needs is to belong and so I volunteered a lot in order to be confirmed as a member of the Pilgrim community. One lesson I’ve learned is that this kind of confirmation—what one senior member called “Pilgrim whacky hyperactivity”—does not inoculate me from loneliness in this new place, nor from grief for the lives I left behind. I’m not clear if there are rituals here for that.

Apologies, reconciliations and penance are also more difficult to define in this place. Most of the time, Pilgrims strike me as extraordinarily kind, at a stage in all our lives when we most need kindness and patience. There’s an unusual amount of acceptance of one another, quirks, warts and all. I suspect that it’s harder for many of us to accept ourselves, to forgive ourselves for our own limits. For example, we joke here about memory loss. We’ve all seen the worry only slightly hidden behind the joking about lost keys or sweaters or shoes or notebooks. But when I lose something, it frightens me; I feel as though I’m not in control of myself and my belongings, and my scatteredness feels public, naked. It’s not easy to talk about the sadness or fear that is, at moments, as much a part of aging as the equanimity that allows us to joke about our creaking and our forgetfulness. Conversely, I will never forget the words of one Pilgrim as he shared his pain, amid his joy and gratitude that he is in a community that truly understands. I covet more of those conversations among us, as much as I honor the ritual ways we use instead.

Our Scriptures tell the story that the disciples on their way to Emmaus “knew the Lord in the breaking of the bread,” and that is how we meet the Lord in one another and in our community, at noon meal. Of all of the sacramental, God-infused moments at Pilgrim Place, that’s my favorite. Just as the Mass has elements that cut across national and cultural lines, all of us, Pitzer, HSC and Friendship Village, Amistad and cottage dwellers, break bread together regardless of where we sit at table. Much more occurs at the Introductions and Announcements time than simple communication of information. As one veteran Pilgrim humorously but poignantly phrased it, “Each of us used to be a Big Somebody; now we are in a bunch of Big Somebodies. Making an announcement is a way of being a Big Somebody again, if only for a moment.” I loved that comment: it gave me a great word for what Pilgrim Place does well--celebrating members’ “Big Somebody.” But noon meal provides the opportunity to call forth and be fed by the Little Somebodies in every one of us at our Lord’s Table.

In tuning in on sacramental parallels with Pilgrim life, I thought I’d have trouble with Matrimony, until I remembered another moment in my first week here. I ran into a group of us “newbies” who were dazedly listing their new experiences here. One of us said, “Think of it; we’ll be with each other until we die.” There was a moment of pregnant silence, then one of us said, “Um, Oh,” that sounded a bit like newlyweds when they begin to realize what they’ve done. Here, it seems to me that the term “Intentional community” has as many meanings for each of us as the term “Married” has for couples,

and those meanings change for us as we age and our needs for one another change as well. As a chaplain and teacher to people at vulnerable places in their lives, I've seen how lonely spouses, neighbors and partners can sometimes be. I wonder if and how that happens here, and how we support one another then. There are little touches: Marilee, who lives directly across from me, said one day several months ago that she loved seeing my lights on at night; I, too, find my soul comforted by seeing her apartment over there.

Holy Orders is an easy one, and I'm not referring to the orders that many of you possess. Years ago, I did a lot of work with family units and parent groups. One session, I responded to a parent's question about her kids' resistance to household tasks with a lyrical exposition to the effect that kids are "ordained" to make their beds, mom is "ordained" to make school lunches, dad is "ordained" to chaperone a school trip, and so on. When I hit the "ordained to do the dishes," the group cracked up...and so did I. Right!! Where was my head! But we are priest to one another, as we pick fruit, distribute campus mail, sort Miscellany, drive one another to appointments, look after one another's pets, pick up lunch boxes for the ill, serve on committees, and move furniture. In our acceptance here, the community has ordained each of us to serve one another as we discern and celebrate who God is, here.

In my beloved little inner city parish in St. Louis, there were lots of deaths. Beyond the daily drive-by killings of grandchildren, nephews and nieces, virtually all of the adults suffered with illnesses of the poor; strokes, poor dental care, diabetes, sickle cell...worry about jobs, pregnancies, transportation, home repairs. I loved that all of those came under the rubric of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, and frequent Anointing services were occasions when foreheads and hands were anointed not only by our priest, but by one another, along with embraces and tears of compassion. Small wonder that Sunday Mass always took 2 hours. I am awed and grateful for anyone here who bestows the anointing of graceful sharing. But it is often said that one of the hurts of growing old is that one is touched far less frequently. We routinely see couples here holding hands on an evening stroll. My mother was blind for many years, and long after her death, I found myself startling complete strangers on the crowded streets of New York City by automatically offering my elbow to them. Still, it was surprising at the warm responses that usually followed. Even little touches can be healing, sacramental.

In this reflection, I'm sharing some of the spiritual framework that I'm relying on as I begin my life here at Pilgrim Place. There is something at the heart of our days and encounters with one another that feels to me like baptismal, confirming, Eucharistic, commitment and healing moments. In "God's Grandeur," Gerard Manley Hopkins speaks of "the dearest freshness" that "lives deep down things." That freshness, I think, is the grace, the sharing in The Holy One's own life, that lives deep down in the most common, truly sacramental moments of our life with one another.

Amen.