

Clergy Renewal of Vows St. Barnabas, 4/4/23
Sermon Preached by the Rev. Elizabeth Nestor

Jesus said: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

Jesus is quoting Hosea the prophet there, a guy whose marriage is in trouble for one reason or another. It may be because his wife, Homer, is unfaithful to him - or it may be that he married her knowing that she would be??? In fact, the entire story of Hosea's marriage, a first maybe a second wife, could just be an extended metaphor for Israel's and our relationship with God - God who is wounded by our unfaithfulness. Hosea's story is complicated, like ours is.

But despite all of that, Hosea says: "God will come to us...like the spring rains which water the earth, for God desires mercy, not sacrifice", which I take to mean that God loves us desperately, if not recklessly, and we will always be forgiven. So that is how we should act, as well.

God made some rules for us, but humans added lots of rules of behavior for getting along with God. Like the Pharisees in today's gospel who are upset that Jesus ate with and taught amongst, sinners, but I'll tell you - when we realize the enormity of our own wrong-headedness, of where it has landed us, that we are sinners - well, no-one likes a person, call them a pharisee, with a ruler or a scale, to measure out those wrongs - we want the open arms of mercy, which is, in fact, what Jesus offers us.

We want a God who meets us where we are: in sorrow, and in pain, and offers mercy and a vision forward - not a blocking hand - to talk to.

I've had just about a year to fret about being here, and spent too long researching the roots of the renewal of vows & chrisem service. Read a lot of baloney also a lot of good stuff: original sources and histories and narratives and I could fill you all in, but I won't - you're welcome - because, really that's not pertinent to the fact that we're here, with the Bishop, and it's Holy Week, and our story is nearing its tragedy, and its triumph.

I've been around the diocese for awhile, but a bit under the radar, so I'll start with an intro, maybe: I was ordained deacon in 1979 and priest in 1980, both in our Cathedral, and I started working as an emergency doctor in July of 1991. And I can say from a number of years of lived experience, that these 2 professions are not just similar - they are the same thing, as it happens - one thing, split apart at some point in the past - to the detriment of both, perhaps... and the attitude of people towards us is strikingly similar as well: (more than one old guy doctor told me his patients sometimes called him 'Father').

There is that word: "profession" - we don't just start these jobs — to join up for them is to be selected - then to prepare, and then we 'profess': we take vows, before others, to serve. We serve the laity: people without 'the knowledge' that we have. We have mysterious words, which we hope will challenge and heal though often they just confuse (for sure they do in medicine).

We wear identifiable clothing: vestments, scrubs, black shirts, white coats, collars. we wield holy instruments of power - stethoscope - sensor - Ultrasound wand - aspergillum - so, to my mind, this sermon felt a lot like presenting for a medical Morbidity and Mortality conference. As clergy we don't have the benefit of a monthly M&M conference, do we?? Has that changed??? Even though it might be beneficial to go over sermon feedback or parish screw-ups that way. And, as a priest who is also a doctor, I sort of wish doctors had something like this – this yearly reminder of what we are about; a recommitment to what got us into this in the first place. The pure idea, the whole-soul commitment, the call.

In both jobs we're used to walking into a room and seeing a person who often we don't know, overcome with grief, or pain, or need, or desperation, or illness, or hope — These are extraordinarily intimate moments of death and life - the core of our work: we all live at this junction of faith and pain and hope for healing, and that is the same, in a hospital bed or a parish office, or a doctor's office, or a church - people open their hearts to us in a way that astonishes, really: it's an intimacy with others, it is the core of what we do. It is the role that people need - not the individual personality, really. And that role is the same: we are here to heal others, though sometimes we also preside over death; (I have seen a lot of death.... and I imagine, so have you.)

Healers are set apart by that and marked. It's a binding, ordination is, and becoming a doctor is as well. Both, I think, are ontologic changes of being, actually. What an honor, and what a cost it can be, as you know well. Privileged to tell the truth to people as we know it, privileged to go deep inside the body or heart of another person, to nurture what is good, to try to re-form or re-direct what is harmful, or not helpful - we are obligated to exercise our craft, to practice for healing and guidance and care - not counting the cost to ourselves. And that need is real and insistent and ever present, and not particularly encouraging of contemplation or deep reflection - and burnout in both professions can feel more real than the rewards are, sometimes. And while we (in both roles) are authority to people we meet, in both roles we have this good discipline of submitting to an authority higher than our own - to God, of course, that's both jobs, and in the ER, that might also be a Cardiologist, or a Surgeon. We, here today, have our Bishop, as representative of the Church's continuity: who brings us together today, to acknowledge our fealty, our obedience to the institution that we are vowed to.

So many similarities - I never really felt that I had left my call behind: just

gained a different perspective, a different approach to the human problem. But, then, of course, there was Covid, and, while not everything in the world is about Covid, it is worth looking at how that challenge was felt and met in the hospitals and in the Church.

I'm going to say up front that I think the church came through, better; I think the Church's response showed you are more resilient. At the time, it felt catastrophic, really, that churches closed. I was so shaken. I wanted this certainty, this continuity 'my rock of refuge, to which I could always turn' as today's Psalm says, since at the time my hospital life was uncertainty, and gravely ill patients. We felt bereft there with the new rules of no real contact with ailing people whose bodies we were almost forbidden to touch, early on - I mean, for me, a healer's touch is essential to who we are - (not in a creepy sort of way...) but we touch to greet, to comfort; we touch to diagnose, to heal - and instantly that was gone.

Sometimes a human acknowledgment is all you've got to offer.

I remember 'seeing' a patient with a resident, very early on in Covid doing what was then a mandated minimal-touch routine: we had on cap, face shield, mask, scrubs, outer robe, gloves, booties - I felt like an astronaut — it felt alien to what we do. But we were all frightened to perhaps bring Covid home on clothing, so we were changing in garages - on porches - no interaction with peers, outside of work, so no exchanges of experience and emotions and crazy cases with each other - and that is the regenerative engine in the ER - that is our absolution from peers for patients' deaths, and there was a long succession of severe illness, and deaths, fear, and lack of PPE (people actually taking PPE from each other's clearly identified bags, wow). It felt defeating, actually.

So this brave fellowship I thought I was a part of, a tight-knit staff at the busiest ER in New England... our fellowship seemed to be only a chimera, after all was said and done. "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world??" Paul said. Oh yes - God did. It was a lousy moment in time, as you well remember.

So much of what we do, in these vocations depends on our internal sense that the sacrifice is worth it: the bad hours, the emotional toll - worth it. But then - people dying without friends and families by their side... Hosea says "Lord, you have torn us to pieces."

But I think that as medicine has increasingly fallen apart the church has kept on doing what it needs to do - through that first Zoom Easter, touchless services, always blessings, outdoor communions, walk-around-the-churchyard counseling, Zoom Convention, and lonely, lonely funerals - - I think clergy kept up the healing when the doctors, didn't, really. And I thank you. It was important.

You kept on showing up: you were gowned at bedsides with the armor of righteousness and home-made masks zooming into homes, providing connection in uncertain and dangerous times providing care in those constrained moments drawing meaning out of fear and death and anger, helping us all look towards wholeness: so necessary, and so life-saving.

You have a right to be exhausted, with all this holding-things-together that you did, and continue to do, and I think, while doctors and people may be fed up with what 'health care' has become under a for-profit model, people see now that the church keeps going. The church didn't freeze in place - it didn't atrophy or go away - you adapted and found a way to keep preaching Jesus' unlikely message of hope and faithfulness: to sit in the midst of the tax collectors and the sinners that we all are and to say: yes there will be separation, there will be death, but there will be resurrection from the dead, as well.

I think it is the Church's moment, really. And when fear of the other, when violence and anger and grievance fill our airways and fill hearts, the church is here: we meet here to preach community and continuity and healing and mercy and resilience, and resurrection.

"Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of us were wise by human standards not many were influential. But God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise", and you did. The people desired mercy and you gave it.

The church has standing to speak, as ever, even more, in this world of ours because you found a way around and through - to show the open arms of mercy, not judgement. Connecting God with your people. So: take a bow: you were called on. You were pushed to the wall: and you rocked it. AMEN