April 28, 2013

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Remember how last week I suggested that we all unplug and listen to God rather than what's going on in the world? Well unfortunately, I didn't take my own advice. I'm still a work in progress, I guess. Anyway, I ran across a letter that I'd like to share with you that just about broke my heart. It's from Mother Margaret Watson, who is the priest in charge of the Cheyenne River Episcopal Mission, to all three of our federal legislators. She writes:

Dear Senator,

My name is Margaret. I am the Episcopal priest serving the Cheyenne River Reservation. It is a difficult job, at best, but I have never felt more fully alive than when serving the good people of South Dakota.

Here is my concern: The "Sequester" cuts have cut to the bone here on the Reservation. Our Social Services workers will be working without a direct office supervisor, and will be expected to absorb the work load of their supervisor when she is laid off beginning May 1. They already each have over 150 clients. I have heard one serves more than 260 clients --adding more is going to make a difficult job impossible.

But more importantly, the clients themselves have been cut off --they have received no monies since the beginning of March. They are coming to my door asking for heating fuel, food, clothes, diapers. Children are at risk. There are no Tribal programs that can assist these folks, they are mostly disabled, elderly with grandchildren in the home, or are desperate for work. Last night, after a funeral, I delivered left over food to people's homes. Funeral food to a family of six of baloney sandwiches, biscuits, two apples, two oranges and some chocolate cake.

I cannot afford to feed all the people who come to my door asking for help. I have emptied my own freezer, my own cupboard in order to help these desperate folks.

I would like to invite you and anyone else who is interested to come and stay here for ten days. Just ten days. I would like you to open my door and hear the stories, see the faces, see the desperation and despair. I would like you to feed the people from my freezer --and when it is empty explain to them why it is they have to go hungry and cold.

I would like you to attend the funeral I would probably do sometime in that 10 days and see the faithfulness, the generosity, the generational grief. I would like you to come with me on home visits and see the extreme poverty out of which that faithfulness and generosity and grief springs.

In the last six months, I have done 40 funerals --six infants, two teen suicides, and many, many folks under the age 40.

And food, shelter and heat are not the only problems here --the Indian Health Services were also part of the Sequester cuts. And the cuts are affecting the Head Start programs.

Have you all become so twisted up in your political lives that you have forgotten the people you have been called to serve?

I think so.

I can only say I am shocked and depressed by my own government. Do better than this. The people you are supposed to serve deserve better.

Shocked and depressed,

The Rev. Margaret Watson

I don't know Mother Margaret well, but she must be some kind of saint to live and work in those conditions. I can tell you that I would have gone plumb crazy by now and would have had to be hauled away in a rubber truck. FORTY funerals? In SIX months?

Okay, I'm taking back what I said about unplugging. Unplug from the gossip, from the talking for talking's sake, from the fear. Especially from the fear. But don't unplug from the human race entirely. They need us.

In our Gospel today, we backtrack a little and join Jesus and the disciples in the upper room at the last supper. Jesus has just washed the apostles' feet and Judas has just left to betray him. This passage is the very beginning of what's known as the Farewell Discourses. In chapters 14 through 17, Jesus prepares his disciples for what is to come, namely his crucifixion and their persecution, and tells them that he will send them the Holy Spirit to comfort and guide them.

Some of John's most beloved passages are in this section, like, "In my Father's house are many mansions," and, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me," and "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you." It's kind of a Greatest Hits of Jesus quotes.

And all of this begins with his telling his disciples that people would know them by the love they have for each other.

He wasn't just talking about the love they had for their own little community in that upper room. He was talking about the love they must have for each and every human being on the planet – friend, enemy, persecutor, executioner. He wasn't asking much, right?

And John is very specific. Jesus tells his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Commandment is a pretty special word in the Old Testament, certainly, but also New Testament. In every occurrence but one in the New Testament, commandments are God's laws. In Jesus, at this moment, we have God himself giving his people this new law – that they love each other so well that all the world will know them to be Christ's followers merely by observing that love in action.

Of course, this isn't really that new. The first two commands in the Decalogue are certainly about love, and one could argue that all of the Ten Commandments are. But this takes it a step further. This takes that love into the realm of action.

It would be impossible to tell if someone truly loved another person if they didn't do anything to show it. Sure, they themselves would know, and God would know, but Jesus specifically said that EVERYONE should know. This love has to be overt and visible and tangible. And Jesus has told them that he will set the ultimate example for them to follow – he will die for them on the Cross.

This is a tall order, which brings me back to Mother Margaret's letter. I would like to help them. I would like the world to know us as followers of Jesus Christ by our visible actions. Since Cheyenne River's need is pressing right now, I'd like to start by sending them the loose offering from today. I have contacted Mother Margaret to see if there is anything specific we can send them, though I suspect that money will be the biggest help right now.

But I hope we don't end there, with Cheyenne River. We already have a relationship with Lower Brule, so I'd like to renew our commitment to them and bring supplies and food out to them this summer. Actually, that's Joanne's project, but I suspect that she'll let me, and anyone else who wants to, tag along.

And I'll find out what the needs of the other missions are, too, to see if there's a way we can help. In know we're not a big or rich parish. And I know that the mission work in South Dakota is a virtually bottomless pit – a black hole of need. But we can't let that stop us from doing what we possibly can.

The worst thing that could happen to us as a parish is not that we run out of money. The worst thing would be that people around us wouldn't have a clue that we are followers of the Risen Christ because we're not showing enough love for our fellow human beings in real and tangible ways.

This is a lot to take in, I know. But please, please bring this to God in your prayers and listen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Let's put our heads together to see how we can be the incarnate love of God in the world and help those around us who are in such desperate need.

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Let us pray.

O gracious and loving God, you work everywhere reconciling, loving, and healing your people and your creation. In your Son and through the power of your Holy Spirit, you invite each of us to join you in your work. We, young and old, lay and ordained, ask you to form us more and more in your image and likeness that our eyes will be fully opened to your mission in the world.

Make us worthy, Lord, to serve the people throughout the world, and right here in South Dakota, who live and die in poverty and hunger. Give them through our hands, this day, their daily bread, and by our understanding love, give them peace and Joy. Amen