

Sermon – The Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 12: 20-31

One of the things I have been grateful for during the enforced isolation this past year has been on-demand TV. I have been able to binge watch TV shows that take me away from the here and now into another time and place. One of the ways we often sooth ourselves during difficult times is to escape either physically, as many New Yorkers did, or via technology.

One of the shows that I have loved is Shameless. I am currently watching the tenth season. It is a story about a poor family who live on the south side of Chicago, a tough neighborhood where survival is a large part of life. The family consists of the largely irresponsible father, played by William H Macy, an absent mother, the eldest sister Fiona who stepped in to raise her siblings when she was ten years old or so, and five other siblings.

The show is of course fictional, but like any great TV, it takes the viewer on an emotional roller coaster as we become invested in the characters. I found myself at times laughing hysterically at the antics of some of the boys who devise numerous schemes to make money. And at other times tearing up as one of them becomes caught up in the injustice of poverty and the fraught decision making that determines life.

As the kids grew up during the ten years of production of the show, their characters each evolved in significant ways. What is fascinating in the writing is how each person's inherent potential is revealed, despite the odds of a society stacked against the poor. I have found myself rooting for each one as they showed glimpses of their potential and then feeling sad when some injustice overcame them, leaving them in tears and depleted, resigned for a time to a life of hopelessness and uncertainty.

Life in any age can be tough. None of us get to avoid the difficulties of life and the suffering that happens to us or a loved one. We can try and mask the sadness that accompanies suffering in life but running away from suffering, a common human reaction, only suppresses it, to rise up in our lives at another time.

The year we have just been through has been full of human suffering on multiple levels. None of this year has been easy for anyone. The experiences we have each lived through will change us in ways that are obvious or in ways that might be hidden from us. Together, the church to which we belong will also change. The impact of both changes can be experienced in one of two ways.

The first is that we become dejected and negative, fighting to be released from the suffering, blaming others, the government perhaps, or even blaming God for our predicament. This is a projection of our frustration on to others. The other way is to give thanks for what we have experienced, for coming through the time of trial and embracing what we have learnt that will make us more resilient. You may have found that a new life is slowly materializing like a new

bud opening in the spring. This way is an interior contemplation of the wonders of God's love, especially in challenging times.

Creative energy flows from the changes we experience as a result of these major life crisis, that is if we allow it to. Potential for change, and change itself, is made possible because these major life events disrupt our stasis, or the careful balance we seek in our lives. Whether it is change that comes from the many setbacks experienced in fighting to get out of poverty like the fictional Gallagher family, or large worldwide events like the COVID-19 plague, potential for human flourishing is unleashed.

The gospel story that we have for today is a story of the unlocking of creative energy and the potential for fruitful change that comes from setbacks. Jesus tells this story to the Greeks that come to see him, his disciples and the curious Jews who are listening in. He tells them the story of what happens to a grain of wheat, a tiny seemingly dead grain, when it falls into the earth to be warmed and watered by God. He is of course using it as an analogy for his own death.

I will never forget this verse of scripture for it is indelibly printed on my heart. When I left Australia for seminary in the middle of 2011, I left behind my aged mother who had given me her blessing to head off overseas some months before. I had been her primary caregiver for many years before that, ever since my father died in 1993. I arrived in New York City on the evening of July 18, 2011. It was a hot and humid night.

For the next couple of weeks I set up life in my dorm room at seminary and tried to make contact with my mother to let her know all was well. But all was not well for her. She had taken ill, had not been eating and subsequently ended up in hospital dehydrated. Soon infection set in and six weeks after my arrival, on the first day of seminary and the eve of my birthday, she died. From the time saying goodbye the day before I left I never spoke to her again.

I was heartbroken. I had a sense before I left Sydney I might not see her again. It was a strange feeling. The day after she died I attended my first Tuesday night Eucharist in the chapel of General Seminary. The preacher was one of the senior students and the gospel passage was this one – John 12: 20-31, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

This passage still resonates with me today. I felt that my mom had chosen to move toward death, inherently knowing that God had plans for me that would keep me in the United States. Her death was a release for both of us. For her, her frail body no longer had to fight for strength and her faith assured her of God's enduring love for her.

For me, it meant that a new life, full of potential lay ahead of me, a life that I had to prayerfully discover, a life I never imagined for myself, but one that God had pre-ordained for me. Like many aspects of our lives I was only able to piece all this together as I reflected on the months and years prior to see how I had felt called to leave my family, career and friends in Sydney,

start at seminary and then live into a new life of ordained ministry here in the US. It still amazes me.

My mon's death unleashed my own inherent potential, full of creative energy and new life. Out of my tears of grief and mourning came a new life of spiritual flourishing, new friends, new learning, new opportunities and new excitement. But also many stumbles and setbacks.

I draw comfort from the stories of how many people in scripture also found life and faith difficult. I am most drawn to people who reveal a side of themselves to us that is not expected, such as a tough man showing his tender side. Several men in scripture reveal their tears, because tears are a part of struggle, they are a release of emotions and in the end show humility. I've certainly shed my fair share.

The apostle Paul tells us in Acts Chapter 20 v18-19 – “[that] you yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews.” Out of Paul's ‘humility and tears’ came an incredible ministry of God's love for all people.

In today's epistle reading to the Hebrews, the writer tells us that, “in the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and with tears, to the one who was able to save him from death.” Jesus knew that his destiny was death at the hands of the religious authorities. He tried to tell his companions but they had trouble understanding his fate. He was to die, so that his life might bear much fruit. Sorrow and joy!

As Christians, who have lived through one of the world's most devastating and traumatic pandemics, we might find immense comfort in these words of scripture today. No doubt many of us have shed tears through these past twelve months. Out of what we have all experienced new life emerges. The grain of wheat that was our life, our collective lives also, has fallen into the earth these past months and God has nurtured it because within it lies the potential for new life, the potential of creativity and the potential to reveal more of God's love to the world.

My prayer for you today is that God may reveal a new life to you through your tears and through your suffering. Just as Jesus Christ, himself traumatized before his death, rose to new life, he opened for all of us the way to live life following in his footsteps. We might dig deep into these experiences, find the kernel of hope that comes through our tears, and step forward to serve Jesus Christ, who promises to be with us for every step we take, and our neighbors.

God uses our experience of suffering to reveal to us a way to use our experiences to grow, to flourish in new life and to be a beacon of hope for those that are yet to hear the good news. We may well remember that the cup we share at each Holy Eucharist, the cup shared by Jesus and his disciples, is both a cup of sorrow and a cup of blessing.

May your lives be blessed as you step out from this somber time of Lent, into a new life of hope and transformation that is Easter, and by your example, gather others to a new and better life in Jesus Christ.

Amen.