

September 24, 2016
St. John's, Chicago
While there's still time

I wonder if you've seen a video clip that's gone viral in social media. It's from a speech President Obama delivered last week at the UN, a summit of leaders on the global refugee crises unfolding in so many places. He talks about the response of a six year old boy to that searing picture of the five year old little boy in Aleppo, Syria that made headlines not long ago across the world. The President says this: "We can learn from a young boy named Alex, who lives not far from here in Scarsdale, New York. Last month, like all of us, Alex saw that heartbreaking image -- five-year-old Omran Daqneesh in Aleppo, Syria, sitting in that ambulance, silent and in shock, trying to wipe the blood from his hands.

And here in New York, Alex, who is just six years old, sat down and wrote me a letter. And he said, he wanted Omran to come live with him and his family. 'Since he won't bring toys,' Alex wrote, 'I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him addition and subtraction. My little sister will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him...We can all play together. We will give him a family and he will be our brother.'

Those are the words of a six-year-old boy," said the President. "He teaches us a lot.

The humanity that a young child can display, who hasn't learned to be cynical, or suspicious, or fearful of other people because of where they're from, or how they look, or how they pray,

and who just understands the notion of treating somebody that is like him with compassion, with kindness -- we can all learn from Alex."

Indeed.

Our readings tonight all point in essentially the same direction. I believe they point in the same direction that kid from Scarsdale is pointing. Deuteronomy reminds us of our common humanity - in it Israel is charged never to forget that they were slaves themselves in Egypt. Teach that to your children, it says. Never forget, and treat others accordingly. The Letter to Timothy calls the church to kindness, to practice every kind of good work, to put into practice what we have known from childhood and been taught from childhood (if it has been a healthy childhood at least). And in Matthew's version of the Gospel, Jesus thanks God for the wisdom that sometimes only children seem to remember - Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. Or, as that version of the scriptures called The Message puts it: "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

The unforced rhythms of grace. I think that's it. That little boy in Scarsdale points the way. Jesus showed us and shares it with us. The Deaconess Anna Alexander, whose feast day is today - a woman born of parents who were slaves and who established a school for children

who would have no other reasonable hope of an education - she shows us too - I love that we have a saint on our church calendar who lived her whole life in simple service to children in a small town in Georgia. It's not that complicated. The Christian life is really not that complicated. It is not always easy, God knows, but it is not complicated. Practice love. Show kindness. Honor the humanity of other people. This is the way to life with God, ultimately to that unimaginable state of being we call eternal life (which, incidentally is not nearly as much about what happens to us when we die as it is about what happens to us when we really start living). This is the heart of what we gather this afternoon to celebrate. These vows of Holy Baptism ask us to put our faith in God who has been revealed to us in a way that boggles the mind, that makes no ordinary sense on purpose - Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the one in three and three in one. That it doesn't make intellectual sense reminds us that God is not a concept to understand but a mystery in which we participate ... the ground of all being, the possibility of life, the source of all that is or ever will be, the beginning and the end. And then our vows bring all that high-octane stuff right back down into the rough and tumble, the daily chances and choices of our everyday world. We don't ask you to cross your fingers and screw up your imagination just long enough to say you believe a lot of abstract theology (nothing wrong with abstract theology, mind you). No, we ask our sisters and brothers to lead us in promising to do some quite ordinary, quite human, quite doable things. Stay with this fellowship we all church, turn away from sins that keep us enslaved, respect the dignity of all people, work for a world of justice and peace. Will you do these things? we ask. Will you put faith into practice? Will you act in ways that will make God's love just that much more real in this world?

Dear Friends, I believe the world is dying for this. We are surrounded by wars, unprecedented refugee crises across the globe. In this country and in this city we are steeped in a public health crisis of gun violence. The unholy trinity of poverty, racism and guns defaces our common humanity. I think I do not have to say much about our current political climate, but the rhetoric of fear and hatred and mistrust will only give birth to more of those things. Senator John Danforth just spoke to our House of Bishops last week in Detroit and said words I have heard from him before, "Politics is officially dead in this country," he said. The word 'politics' means the art of compromise." There has rarely been a time, it seems to me, when the simple, challenging, life-changing message of the Gospel has been more needed, not just proclaimed, but lived.

Here's one of my favorite poems by a cranky Englishman named Philip Larkin:

The mower stalled, twice; kneeling, I found

A hedgehog jammed up against the blades,
Killed. It had been in the long grass.

I had seen it before, and even fed it, once.
Now I had mauled its unobtrusive world
Unmendably. Burial was no help:

Next morning I got up and it did not.
The first day after a death, the new absence
Is always the same; we should be careful

Of each other, we should be kind
While there is still time.

Today, let's begin again, recommit ourselves again, ask for the grace to make real in our lives what we profess by our faith. While there is still time.