

Advent III

Cycle C, '18

Zephaniah 3:14-18/Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:10-18

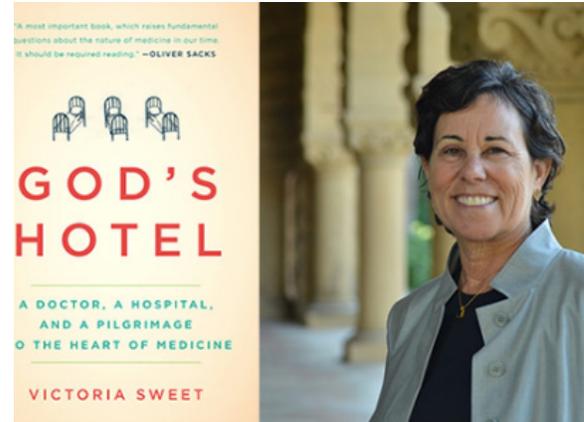
THE OPPORTUNITY IS THERE – SEIZE IT!

God's Hotel: A Doctor, a Hospital, and a Pilgrimage to the Heart of Medicine is a book by Dr. Victoria Sweet. It is her memoir of caring for patients at San Francisco's Laguna Honda Hospital. That hospital has an interesting history. Laguna Honda opened in 1866 to care for one of the first generations of San Franciscans, the Gold Rush pioneers. Many people who had come west seeking their fortunes in the gold and silver mines of Northern California went bust instead. The burgeoning city responded to its growing numbers of people in need by constructing a four story wood frame building to house indigent San Franciscans on the old San Miguel Rancho, west of Twin Peaks. The rancho had been the property of José de Noe, the last *alcalde*, or mayor, of San Francisco in the days when the city was still part of Mexico. It was a good place for people to grow their own food and tend animals. Nearby, on the sloping land behind Twin Peaks, a natural spring fed a deep lagoon, a *laguna honda*.



The building was known as the "Almshouse," which until the 20th century was a common term for a place of refuge housing people who were chronically ill or impoverished with nowhere else to go. The

San Francisco hospital is the last "almshouse" hospital of its kind in the country, a facility serving the city's poorest and most destitute.



Her touching, often hilarious stories reveal how these extraordinary souls transformed Dr. Sweet's understanding of her work as a physician. Dr. Sweet writes about one of her colleagues, Dr. Curtis, who cared for stroke patients. One day during rounds, Dr. Curtis saw that a patient, who had been ready for discharge months before, was still at the hospital, still in a wheelchair, still in therapy. Dr. Curtis asked why the patient, who was able to walk, was still in a wheelchair. "No shoes, doc," the man said. "They ordered me special shoes, but they're waiting for Medicaid to approve them." "How long have they been waiting?" Dr. Curtis asked. "Three months." The doctor thought a moment. "What size shoe do you wear?" "Size nine."

Then Dr. Curtis, despite the rounds he still had to finish and the charts he had to dictate, left the ward, got in his car, and drove to Walmart, where he bought a pair of size-nine running shoes for \$16.99. He returned to the hospital, put them on the patient's feet and wrote the discharge orders. Dr. Sweet ran into Dr. Curtis as he returned with the shoes. *Was he planning to submit his receipt for reimbursement?* she asked. He laughed. Which left Dr.

Sweet wondering: Why had Dr. Curtis done this? And why hadn't anyone else? She writes:

It was a simple thing to do, but it never would have occurred to me to do it. I would have been frustrated with the shoe delay, of course, and would have filled out a second or even a third Medicaid request. I might have even written Medicaid or braved its phone tree to complain about the time the pair of shoes was taking. But it would have never occurred to me to go to Walmart and buy the patient's shoes. I had too much to do, too many forms to fill out, too many other patients to see. It would have meant crossing a kind of inefficiency boundary. And yet Dr. Curtis got in his car without much questioning . . . hurrying back to the ward with the shoes to put them on the patient — himself. He reminded me of an aphorism I loved but never understood: "The secret in the care of the patient is in caring for the patient."

When I read the story about Dr. Curtis reported by his fellow physician, Dr. Sweet, I was reminded of a story that a parishioner told me a few years ago about an incident much closer to home. I've shared it with you before. The parishioner and her husband were going to Peet's for coffee and they passed a man who was obviously a derelict, smelled horrible and had only one shoe on. Probably a homeless person, and as you know, we don't have too many of those types in our community. We're very uncomfortable with those types when they come around. Well, they went into Peet's, ordered coffee and sat down. They could see the man outside the window at one of the outdoor café tables, when someone they knew came up to talk to them. The woman who approached them saw the man outside and rolled her eyes,

her arched brow indicating how obviously out of place she thought he was in Lafayette. Then, two young guys in their 20's who also saw the man, took him a cup of coffee and a roll and sat down and talked with him for a while.



When they got up to leave, one of the young men took off his shoes, bent down and removed the one beat-up shoe that the man was wearing and put his shoes on the man's feet. They walked to their car and drove away. Our parishioner and her husband gasped with the breath of the Spirit over the expression of selfless love they had just witnessed. They left the coffee shop with a different perspective, a new understanding of how the wounds of one person can awaken the spirit of love and compassion in someone whose heart is open. In her book, Dr. Curtis, whether she realizes it or not, shares the vision of the kingdom of God articulated by John the Baptist in today's Gospel: seeing individuals in need and not names on forms, willing to be the solution to a problem rather than a bystander, seeking justice and mercy before efficiency.

In the spirit of John the Baptizer, we are all called to be witnesses of God's love by the love we extend to others; we are called to be precursors of his justice by our

unfailing commitment to what is right and good for others; we are called to be reflections of the light of God's Christ in our taking up Jesus' work of forgiveness, mercy and compassion.



The significant thrust of John the Baptist's message that can ring true for us is the way he dealt with people from various occupations. His message, even though it drove him to the isolation of the desert, ordered others not to leave their jobs, but to work out their salvation by doing that job as it should be done. Let the tax-collector be a good tax collector; let the soldier be a good soldier. It's our duty to serve God where God has set us. The spirituality of St. Francis de Sales was completely founded on the same principle: "Be who you are and be that well!" We don't have to search in vain for strange or extreme ways to bring the gospel to life. The stage is already set for us from the moment we wake up. Each day, with its occupation and its interactions, forms the pathway for the movement of grace in our lives and the lives of those we encounter. It was John the Baptist's conviction that nowhere can a person serve God better than in our day's work. It's in our daily labors that we have the opportunity to practice all the Christian virtues, great and small: patience, compassion, understanding, courage, humility, honesty, charity.

We have to let ourselves be caught up in the overwhelming and unfailing love of God and be able to find it in our daily lives. When the crowds heard John speak, they realized he was offering them a role they could play in the coming kingdom. They didn't have to renounce their lives, go on a lengthy pilgrimage or offer strange sacrifice. No, participating in God's new kingdom was available to them where they were, requiring only the little bit of faith necessary to see the sacred in the ordinary. It was, in short, entirely within their reach: "Share. Be fair. Don't bully." It may not be heroic, but it was something they could do. It's something, when you think about it, that anyone can do. Which means that it's something we can do, too.



John Kasper, ofs