

Thanksgiving Interfaith Service

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When I was a newly ordained priest many years ago, I was sent to serve at a parish on the edge of downtown Seattle. It was a busy cathedral church, with four services every day, plus outreach to seven hospitals, multiple nursing homes, the King County Jail, and a youth detention center.

I was the youngest priest on the staff, and so guess who the night bell, the hospital beeper, and the 6:25 a.m. Mass most frequently for the next five years.

It was there, at that early morning service, that I met a man who was so exceptional, so extraordinary, that he has influenced my life and ministry right up to the present day.

I will venture to say that unbeknownst to you, that same man he has likely impacted your life as well, either personally or through the lives of your family or friends.

The man I am describing always arrived for services late and left early.

He often appeared drowsy, disheveled, preoccupied, and aloof, but always absorbed in deep prayer.

As the weeks became months, I began to notice his well-established pattern, and became quite curious. Who was he? What was his life story? Why was he always in a hurry and seemed to be a million miles away?

Finally my curiosity got the best of me, and I began to inquire just who this stranger might be.

As it turned out, he was a world renowned heart surgeon, a cardiovascular doctor, who with a team of colleagues, pioneered coronary bypass surgery as we know it today.

He was a clinical professor of medicine at the University of Washington, the father of eight, who practiced heart medicine for 33 years. For over three decades, he operated on 10,000 heart patients, saving the lives of thousands of heart patients, and improving the quality of life for thousands more.

During my tenure at St. James Cathedral, I became friends with this Doctor Lester Sauvage. I learned first-hand that he was a devoted father and husband, a man with

unshakable faith in God, a physician who started each day enveloped in prayer, asking God to bless and guide his hands before each and every surgery he performed.

Dr. Sauvage was a living witness to the power of faith, a man whose life was fueled by prayer and thanksgiving.

I called him a miracle worker, though he would tell you that he was just doing what God's will-- nothing more, nothing less. "Someday I'll be on that gurney myself, and I hope that the students I have trained will do their best for me."

As Doctor Sauvage neared his retirement, he placed a call to my office, and asked for a special favor. "I have just completed the first draft of a new book," he told me. "I would like you to read it with a critical eye. Get out your red pen, mark it up, and give me your honest feedback."

Well I opened the book and discovered that Mother Teresa of Calcutta had already written a foreword to his book, endorsing it enthusiastically. I put down the red pen, and thought to myself, "If she likes it, I like it!"

The book he wrote was called The Open Heart. It is a surprising reflection on his 30+ years of practice, the memoirs of a faithful physician looking backwards, offering advice to patients as they face the biggest challenge of their life. It is nearly devoid of references to medication, or nutrition, or exercise.

Rather, it is a fireside chat between a doctor and his patients, surprisingly simple and disarmingly wise. In the words of the TV Doctor Dean Ornish, Dr. Sauvage shows us "how to open not only our physical hearts but also our spiritual and emotional hearts as well."

Who among us has not already experienced the dark night of the soul, an unexpected life crisis--spiritual, emotional, physical, or financial, a crisis that throws our life into a tail spin, and tests the mettle of our spirit. Who has not experienced the verity of John Lennon's observation that "Life is what happens after all the plans are made?"

It is precisely there that life begins in earnest. Dr. Martin Luther King said poetically what we know in our hearts: "Only in darkness can we see the stars."

In the middle of life's darkest hours and most challenging moments, that Dr. Sauvage asked his patients three seemingly simple questions:

- Why do you want to keep on living?
- What will you do differently from this day forward?
- How will this present crisis change the course of your life and improve the quality of your remaining days?

And then, just when the patient thought he was through philosophizing, Dr. Sauvage took it to another level. He prescribed a four part prescription, which I have labeled, "A prescription for a happy heart." He dispensed this prescription to everyone—religious on non-religious, it didn't matter.

- Pray often, for God knows you by name and loves you unconditionally;
- Serve others in greater need than yourself, regardless of your health present health condition;
- Reconcile broken relationships;
- And never let another day go by without thanking God for the countless blessings you have in your life.

The **first part of the prescription** is to pray often, for God knows you by name love you with an everlasting love.

Prayer is the common denominator we share as a diverse people of faith. Prayer is the bond that binds our hearts together, the mortar that keeps our faith in God strong and enduring. Prayer is the wellspring of our inner peace, our balm of Gilead, the fuel that keeps us going in the face of setbacks and adversity.

The Psalmist says is simply and profoundly, "My soul rests in God alone, from whom comes my salvation. God alone is my rock and my salvation my secure height. I shall never fall." (*Psalm 62*)

The 4th century Saint Augustine of Hippo opined, "*Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee O Lord,*" and assured us that "*God is closer to us than we are to ourselves (Interior intimo meo).*"

In Islam, prayer is the rhythm of life, at dawn and noon, at sunset, and before retiring.

The Hindu Mantra turns the eye of the heart to the Universal Divine Energy, vital spiritual energy as the essence of existence, the destroyer of suffering, happiness that is right and luminous like the Sun, brilliance that purifies us and guides our righteous wisdom on the right path.

Our commitment to prayer is the first prescription to a happy heart, or in the words of Paul, I will show you a way that surpasses all others." This is the first way that we stand together in love.

The **second part of our prescription** is pure and simple.

Dr. Sauvage admonished his patients to serve others in greater need than ourselves.

For the Hindu, dana or giving of self is an important part of one's religious duty. Each person has a dharma toward family, society, the world, and toward all living things. Giving begins at home, but extends well beyond the walls of the home.

In the Jewish tradition, thanksgiving always entails selfless service, and care of others in greater need. The Book of Deuteronomy sums it up in these words: "If there is among you a poor person, one of your kin, in any of your towns within your land which God gives you, you shall not harden your hearts or shut your hand against them, but you shall open your hand to them and lend them sufficient for their needs, whatever they may be." (*Deut. 15-7-8*)

In the Christian tradition, Jesus gave his followers a living example, as he knelt to wash the feet of his disciples. In the Gospel of Mark, the teaching is clear and compelling: "*The Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve.*" And so it must be with his disciples in every age.

In the Koran, service to humanity is addressed in powerful and compelling words: "*No one among you is a true believer unless he loves for others what he loves for himself. Show kindness to parents, and kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and to the neighbor that is a kinsman, in the neighbor that is a stranger, and the companion by your side, and the wayfarer too... Surely Allah loves not the proud and the boastful.*"

The second part of our prescription is our common vision and common commitment: To have tenderness toward the least, the last, and the lowliest in our midst.

There are to be no throw-away people, no second class citizens, no disposable souls. No exceptions! No exceptions! No exceptions!

This is the second part of our prescription that helps us stand together in love.

The **third prescription** is the most difficult of all. In a world that seems set on dividing hearts and scattering communities, of fostering racism and turning blind eye toward gun violence, of aiding and abetting incivility and rudeness in public discourse, we need reconciliation more than ever.

The great religious traditions are of one voice: Reconcile broken relationships. Seek forgiveness, and strive tirelessly for peace.

The Christian scripture is direct and challenging: "*Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.*"

The highly popular Saint Francis of Assisi wrote, "Make me a channel of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow your love."

In the ancient Hebrew Scripture, the prophet Micah asks the hard question: "Whose iniquities does God tolerate? A person who forgives the transgressions of another."

The Qur'an states emphatically, "Repel wrong with goodness and your foe will become as close to you as an old and valued friend...the offering of kind words and gifts in the midst of enmity can soften the hearts and lead toward a more peaceful future."

Our communities of faith must set a new standard, and raise a new bar. Violence is never acceptable. Disrespect is never acceptable. Incivility is never acceptable. Name calling, racial slurs and vicious epithets are never acceptable. We need new eyes, new vision, and a new resolve to reconcile the heart of humankind, and see one another as sons and daughters of the same living God.

This third part of our prescription strengthens our resolve to stand together in love.

Finally, **part four of Dr. Sauvage's prescription** captures the spirit of the season-- never let another day go by without thanking and praising God for the countless blessings we have received that his hand.

This is the season for holy remembering!

Each time we breathe clean air, or drink potable water, or take a warm shower, or share a meal, or gaze at the stars, or lay our heads on a pillow, or look into the eyes of our children and grandchildren, it is time for praise and thanksgiving.

The Sacred Scriptures, both Old and New Testament, and the sacred writings of every tradition are permeated with the constant theme of gratitude for all we have received at the hands of Providence.

Thanksgiving is our shared response to the continual and constant blessings, all things visible and invisible, that we have received from the hands of the Divine.

Dr. Martin Luther King gives voice to the spirit of Thanksgiving and quickens our resolve to stand together in love.

"When our days become dreary with low hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in the universe working to pull down the gigantic forces of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays in the bright tomorrows."

Is this not the cause for our Thanksgiving? Is this not cause for praise and gratitude? Is this not a prescription for a happy heart and a pathway to a better world?

Isn't this why we can stand together in love?

Praise to our good and gracious God. Amen. Alleluia!