

REFLECTION

Yvonne Fisher

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

This week's Gospel reading from the lectionary opens with Jesus going to the mountain alone to pray while the disciples are off shore in a boat when a storm hits and they become afraid and Jesus appears to be walking on the water toward them when he says, It's me—Don't be afraid. Then Peter says if it's really you saying don't be afraid then tell me to come to you and Peter steps confidently out and then sinks until Jesus offers his hand and says Be Not Afraid.

We are like this Peter phenomenon—surrounded by famine, flood, wars, racism, and addiction, while partisanship and mistrust threaten our democracy. We long for solid ground and faithful communities—and then we see him calling us to him saying Don't Be Afraid as he takes our hand.

As many of you know, for the past 15 months, I have been mainly at my grandson Bennett's bedside as he slowly recovers from ALL leukemia which started with no symptoms at age 6 until a massive brain hemorrhage occurred on a Sunday morning. He was then flown to the nearest children's hospital in Hartford Connecticut where a pediatric brain surgeon would perform an 8-hour surgery to stop the bleeding to save his life. Bennett hung on between life and death for a few weeks. In May 2016, he was stable enough to be transferred to Memorial Sloan Kettering in NYC where he remained until December when he was moved to Blythedale Children's Hospital returning to MSK intensive care in January when he suffered meningitis and a blood clot. He continued to fight with his amazing spirit of determination and recovered enough to be able to come home this May returning for the weekly chemo treatments at MSK. He is still home where he has nursing care night and day and Occupational and Physical Therapies. Although unable to walk, he is able to talk, laugh at jokes and especially the funny antics of his 10-year-old brother John. He is reading now and beginning to do some movements of his legs while sitting. With the aid of special equipment, he is able to stand for 60 minutes during his physical therapy. Just last week, through the generous gifts from individuals in this church and others to a Caring Fund for Bennett, he is able to be transported for family trips in the new van equipped for his wheelchair. His medical team says with children's recovery it is like reading tea leaves, they cannot predict what his recovery will be but his brain scans are promising and he is young. The cancer too continues to be in remission with each test and his maintenance chemo treatment will continue for another year.

Bennett's positive determination has been a source of inspiration for his family and medical team (affectionally called the B Team) at home and the hospital. My daughter, son in law and brother John have kept their courage and hope and are an amazing team.

For me this has been a spiritual journey like no other as I grappled with doubts, fears, grief, and pain trying to accept something I cannot change in my beloved grandson's life. My family and I could never have continued the journey without the prayers, emails, prayer shawls, text messages, support and love of this community and also the community and elementary school of North Salem, NY as well as and many other friends and extended family all over the country and world. After my son in law Ryan, editor of Popular Mechanics, interviewed Joe Biden and his son, Hunter for a magazine article about father/son relationships, Biden talked about how the love and support of family and friends helped him through the death of his first wife and daughter in a car accident and then the death of his son Beau to cancer. When he heard about Bennett, he called Ryan and offered the resources of his Moon shot Cancer Committee whose aim is to make more therapies available to more patients, while improving the ability to prevent cancer and detect it at an early stage.

Dr. Jon Walton, minister of The New York Presbyterian Church of New York City (a church similar to SPC) visited and prayed many times at the hospital and preached a sermon that the act of praying from the church community and others is an act of love for all those prayed for.

The words of Jesus Be Not Afraid are mentioned many times in his ministry and they became my mantra during this time. How do we face and accept the painful realities of life some of the givens of human existence—things that cannot be changed. I prayed the Serenity Prayer often: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.

Dr. David Richo, psychotherapist and author says there are 5 unavoidable givens of life that we ALL face:

1. Everything changes and ends
2. Things do not always go according to plan
3. Life is not always fair
4. Pain is a part of life
5. People are not always loving and loyal all the time
6. How do we all find serenity in accepting these realities of life?

Comforting for me are the words from our gospel today when Jesus says: Be Not Afraid while in the raging storms of life. He also said: My peace I give to you, don't let your hearts be troubled and don't be afraid; and again when the father of a dying son asks Jesus to heal his son, Jesus said on the way to see the son, Don't be afraid. This search for serenity is a continual quest that brings us to our knees as we pray to let go and trust God as we try to accept these givens of life.

I have attended SPC for 41 years and I have witnessed the faithfulness, love and compassion of this praying congregation over those years. Bennett visited the Sunday Studio three years ago, when he was 5. When he got in the car, he held out his arms and said "God loves everybody"—he truly GOT the message from this school of love.

In the last 15 months, I have sensed the prayers of the praying community of SPC and others while in the hospital with Bennett. Many of you still tell me that Bennett is in your prayers every day. Prayer is a big part of this school of love. Even if we don't know how or what to pray-- we are told in Romans that when we don't know what to pray, the Spirit intercedes with signs too deep for words. This congregation embraces and practices contemplative prayer through prayer groups, Taize services, retreats and Sunday morning seminars. Franciscan Father and author Richard Rohr says "we need contemplative practices to loosen our ego attachment to certainty and retrain our minds to understand the wisdom of paradox."

In the midst of the pain, when I could not pray, I was comforted by knowing that others were praying for Bennett and our family. I am forever grateful for this loving community and for Bennett's amazing medical team of doctors, nurses and therapists.

Letting go and Trusting God in these unavoidable givens of life is another way of facing our fears and like Proverbs says: Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding.

May we be given the outrageous audacity to step out into raging waters as Jesus calls us and may we find the courage to trust ourselves enough to keep trusting God.

Let us remember the words of Jesus as we face our fears: Be Not Afraid I am with you.

And the words of Hafiz: Keep holding hands and praying for each other in this beloved community as we go through dangerous terrain facing the givens of life.

And what Randy often said: Life is difficult but Grace abounds.

In closing hear the words of Howard Thurman, the African American author, theologian and civil rights leader: In the stillness of the quiet, if we listen, we can hear the whisper of the heart giving strength to weakness, courage to fear, and hope to despair.

May it be so.