

## ST. JEROME CHURCH MEN'S MINISTRY REFLECTIONS

Lee writes:

It is the every day little events that help me close the gap. A few years ago I was picking up flowers for our 45th wedding anniversary or maybe my 44th. The girl in the florist shop who was chewing gum and talking on her cell phone asked me what the flowers were for. I said it was our 45th wedding anniversary and I was bringing these flowers home to my wife. She asked if the 45 years were cumulative and I said no, it was the same woman that I met in high school and married.

She said, "Oh, Jesus, I don't know anyone who has been married that long." And it dawned on me that she was absolutely correct, but I just did not connect the dots that it was Jesus in our lives that carried us through. Thanks for helping me connect the dots.

Joe writes:

Yesterday morning [a few days after the Haiti earthquake] as I was getting on an elevator, two elderly Haitian women were walking toward the door. I held it for them and when they got on I asked what floor they were going to? They said they were going to the second floor, the Senior Center. I pressed the button and began to look at the newspaper I was holding. One of the women looked at me and said something in a very heavy accent. At first I did not think she was talking to me, but then she said it again and looked right at me. I said, "I am sorry?" She repeated herself two more times but I did not understand. Finally, she said it very slowly so that I would understand her. "Jesus...loves...you!" I was taken aback, but immediately replied, "I know and he loves you too!" She smiled and she and the other woman got off the elevator. As they walked away I put my hand on the elevator door so it would not close and said to them, "I am praying for the people of Haiti." They looked back at me, smiled, and shook their heads in acknowledgement.

I got off the elevator and went to my meeting and did not think about it again. But throughout the day this small encounter kept coming into my consciousness. Every time I thought of it I felt a positive feeling but I knew that there was more to it than just that. I knew I had had a spiritual experience. What was it about this small ride on the elevator that was a window into the sacred? Nothing particular had gone on between us. I held

the door and went back to my newspaper. There was no great moment of kindness or any intense interaction. It was a moment like so many, people riding together on an elevator, walking on the street, riding the bus or subway, almost invisible to each other.

What I think made this encounter holy was that this woman did not allow me to be invisible to her. She saw the Christ in me and acknowledged that reality. Not because of my holiness, not because I did something spectacular. She knows that the risen Christ is alive in all of us and she wanted me to know it too. She reminded me of a truth that I often forget. Jesus loves me, and he loves us all.

While this interaction was powerful it became even more significant in light of what has happened in Haiti during this last week. These two women I am sure have lost family members in the quake and have watched the sheer destruction of their homeland and they have been helpless to stop it. I am sure it is constantly on their minds and overwhelms them. The act of expressing Jesus' love for me seemed to me to be an incredibly selfless and compassionate act. Jesus loves you! She told me in the moment of her deep despair. Maybe partly as a way to remind herself but I think mostly to remind me and to help me share that love with others. She is the suffering Jesus reaching out to me and asking me to join her in the healing work of bringing God's love to the world.

Tom writes:

These readings [from the letters of Paul and of Peter] remind me to do a "reality check."

Is my behavior, at home or when I'm out in the world, what God would want from me? Can people look at the way that I conduct myself, and find that I measure up to Christian principles? Or can they watch me, and say that Christians have high-minded rules, but are no better than anyone else? For example, have I been "temperate, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, love, and endurance"? When I am under authority, am I a good subordinate?

If I am honest with myself, I know that I have not shown the love, faith, dignity, or even-temperedness that I should.

St. Paul warned us against "godless ways." Obviously this is a warning against worshiping the false gods of this world, be they money, possessions, power, or pleasures. But it is also a warning not to behave in a manner which would suggest that there is no God.

No one can see the wind, but we know that it is present from its effect on the clouds, trees, and birds. Similarly, no one can see God, but people can know He is present from his effect on the behavior of Christians. If Christians live well, others can look upon us and say "I want what they have."

Can people see the effects of God in my behavior, or do they see his absence in my errors or failures to act? If I'm honest with myself, I know that I have done some things right, but I have much work ahead of me.

Bill writes:

The story of Jonah depicts the human condition as well as any great Biblical tale. How universal is the story of a weak human being ignoring, rejecting, or running away from the call of the divine! Again, our way of reflecting on this universal story is to bear witness to our own versions of it. In the past, many of us have turned to God only in times of trouble or danger. Perhaps when we were younger, we tried to rely more on ourselves, thinking we could do everything on our own or that we did not need God. This youthful feeling of indestructibility is one that most would love to feel again, but we also know that the attitudes of youth can take us only so far. At some point, we all hit a wall, a place in life in which we acknowledge our powerlessness and smallness in the face of the Lord. "Let go, let God" is an appropriate mantra for reminding ourselves that like Jonah, we all, ultimately, are in God's hands - that instead of trying to do it all ourselves, we need to slow down, listen to God, and open up to God's presence.

Our meeting Saturday raised some wonderfully compelling questions. How do we react when God calls? When do we turn to God? How do we know God? These are questions that bring us right to the heart of philosophical/theological discussions. We find God in both unexpected and expected places - in conflicts with our family and in the power and grandeur of nature. As Jonah and, of course, the Book of Job remind us, God is other - the thou to whom the I speaks - yet the Other, while intimate and loving, is always truly inscrutable, awesome, and wondrous. When, as Alex commented, we reduce God, to a mere intelligible version of ourselves - a kind of alter-ego to whom we speak from time to time, we reduce God by "creating" the divine in our own image.

Probably each of us is drawn to the Men of Faith and Action group on Saturday morning because we are exploring our own relationship with

God, a topic that in some form we discuss every week. This week we wondered about the role of fear, what it means to have a "Fear of the Lord." The question yielded a fascinating generational dynamic: older members testified to a religious upbringing in which God was demanding and fearsome; younger members raised in a post-Vatican II church have difficulty understanding the idea of a stern and punishing God, feeling more comfortable with a merciful, tolerant, and all-loving God. For sure, all agree, "fear" of God does not mean that God wants us to be frightened of, terrified of, or paranoid about Him. Rather an all-loving God is also an awesome and wondrous God – a God so vast and beyond us that we have no choice but to show an emotion that is at the very least respect but more certainly something far greater, approaching awe and wonder. Thus, I find it hard to accept a terrifying God that causes us to run away in fear, but I do know that the act of deepening one's faith and acting more in accord with God's will is a difficult and at times scary prospect.

Joe writes:

I left our Men's Ministry meeting feeling a little dissatisfied on Saturday. Like anything, sometimes our discussions move me deeply and help me see clearly God's work in my life; other times it requires a little more effort.

As we talked about abundance I struggled with the notion that I needed God's abundance. It seemed to me that I already had all the abundance I will ever need. I have more stuff than I can ever use and a great family, great friends, a good job, etc. This notion of abundance and God bringing abundance to me when I was in need did not ring true for me. Of course I understand that God gives that abundance but it seems it is always there in my life. So I thought, "lucky me" and tried to listen to our conversation.

On Tuesday December 23 we were dismissing our students at 11:45. I had a great plan for the rest of the day. First, at 11 I would meet my colleagues for cookies and Christmas greetings and then when the bell rang I would run to Lord and Taylor and do the last minute shopping I do every year. After that, home with the family, Christmas Carols playing, kids excited, preparing for Christmas Eve, wrapping presents and a glass of wine. Abundance to the 10th power!

This plan got derailed at 10:45 when Maria, a student I had been working with all fall, came to my office. I looked up from writing

Christmas cards to my colleagues and saw her standing there. In my head I hoped she just wanted to wish me a Merry Christmas but the butterflies in my stomach knew better. Maria had been hospitalized earlier in the fall because she was suicidal and when she came into my office 15 minutes before my staff holiday party she was again feeling suicidal. Her story came out through her tears, her anger at her parents, her feelings of being so behind in her school work, her depression, her rage, her inability to feel that she could keep herself safe over the two-week holiday break. As I listened I tried to down play her need; she would be ok; what about staying with friends? But I knew she needed to return to the hospital and I would have to facilitate that plan.

I told Maria that she needed to go back and she cried and cried. "It's Christmas. I do not want to be in the hospital during Christmas." I understood but knew it was our only choice. Finally after a couple of hours passed (time I was suppose to be at Lord and Taylor) we found her a bed and found her Mom and Dad. But she was so angry at her parents she did not feel she could go with them to the hospital. The only other choice, according to the admissions people at Hall Brooke, was to call an ambulance and send her to Stamford's ER and hope the bed would be still available after sitting in the ER for hours. What should we do? She could not go with Mom and Dad; the ER would be a nightmare and, according to Mom, there were no other relatives who could drive her. Finally, at 2 in the afternoon I decided that I would drive her. So Maria and her Dad got into my car and off we went to Hall Brooke in Westport. We drove in silence to the hospital and then went to admitting where they took Maria and her father in to begin the paper work. About 3 in the afternoon I walked to my car exhausted by this young girl's pain.

As I sat in my car I thought about Maria, and I prayed for her and her family and I began to feel a sense of peace that I was able to be there for her. I started the car and drove home to begin my abundant Christmas. As Fr. David and I talked on Sunday, I said I wondered where God was in all of that and I knew that God was in me sharing this girl's burden, carrying a little bit of her pain. He said "Yes, but also you were like Joseph, taking Mary and the baby into Egypt, to safety." In our reading from Kings, Elisha asked the widow "How can I help you?" Isn't that what I did with Maria? Isn't that where my abundance shined through?

God put me in Maria's path to share my abundance with her; to help her carry her cross. He gives me the freedom to choose what to do. I had

time, a car, skills, and talents to share with this girl in abundance. My abundance helped me bring God's abundant love to another; to be the incarnate God in the life of this girl and her family. This was the Christmas blessing I needed; this was the moment where Christmas became real to me. This is where the God who enters our humanity helped me to enter another's humanity and share her burden. This was Christmas! And as it turned out I learned one other lesson from this experience and our Saturday morning discussion. I was obedient to God and to Maria on this day. I set aside my own needs and desire for the other, followed Jesus the healer and found him waiting for me in Maria and all her suffering. The word obedience comes from the Latin word *obedio*. *Obedio* is defined as listening to another, paying attention to them, or following their advice. When I think of obedience in those terms my time with Maria takes on new meaning. As hard as I struggled to ignore her, to wish her problems away, ultimately I had to be obedient to her and to the God who loves her desperately and called me to manifest that love. Obedience can be found in the strangest places.

I guess Saturday morning did not leave me so dissatisfied after all!

Bill writes:

In the short passage from James 4, the author reminds those who plan to "spend a year" in town "doing business" to "make a profit" that individuals have no idea what life will "be like" tomorrow and that each of us is a "puff of smoke" that will disappear fast. James reminds us of God's will and our own arrogance, urging us to do the right thing and avoid sin. The passage challenges us to self-reflection about how much stock we put in our own ability to control our lives.

Such a passage confronts us to think about our life stories – where we have gone in life; where we have ended up; and whether what has happened in our lives at all reflects what we planned or might have planned. Obviously, as many have shared, life rarely goes according to plan. Despite such efforts as business planning at work, personal life choices, and establishing a secure career and safe home, we realize, when we step back how little control we really have. Perhaps, this healthy realization of our powerlessness along with an appreciation of our great gifts (living in an affluent democratic society, education, innate intelligence, health, a solid family, a work ethic etc....) helps us find God and reject that "boasting" and "arrogance" in favor of humility and simplicity.

At the heart of reflecting on this passage is discerning the line between our personal control and where, precisely, we put ourselves in God's hands. In my mind, it is a balance. The Gospel calls us often to be prepared, to plan. In life, we know we have to plan. A businessman cannot initiate any business without a plan. A teacher is foolish to enter the classroom without one. A father must plan for his family. Planning, it appears, is crucial to managing a rich life. However, we need to think about where we put our priorities, our focus, in our planning. Is our focus on making a profit? Or do we put others at the center of what we plan? Do we put God at the center of our plans?

In our group reflections, we always return to the idea of prayer to cope with the tough issues. In life, how do we react when things don't go according to plan, which is most of the time? Do we realize that our powers are so limited and we are in God's hands? In our affluent American culture of self-determination, we might look outside ourselves to the deep faith among people who have little material wealth and seem to have much less control over their lives. I suspect we would find the power of prayer at work among those people.

Dan writes:

I definitely look forward to the Saturday morning meetings. They are a chance to share about and hear what other men have to say about our lives in light of what it takes to be a believer who follows Jesus. Although I do not discuss any specifics of the meetings with her, my wife sees that the Saturday morning meetings are something I should not be without, an outlet for me. So how can I describe the Saturday morning meetings? A sounding board, a shared bonding, a time apart, a set time for opening up, a measured time for knowing I am not terminally unique in my experiences, mistakes, and values as a person, a father, a husband, a doer in the world.