

All Saints Day 2017

1 John 3:1-3

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Last week we celebrated the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. We remembered and we honored the acts of Martin Luther, John Calvin and others who took a stand, who opened the Church to conversations that would change the landscape forever... It was a time of deep movement of the Holy Spirit. But while schisms...and there have been many since that time...can be positive, they can also be very painful.

The movement among the reformers was meant to help the average person know that each and every person is a child, in fact, a saint of God...even as they remain VERY human. They wanted all to know that you and I had/have equal and direct access to God. But all these years later, we still have trouble recognizing and treating each other as brothers and sisters...all children of God.

This weekend, I was at a conference at Yale Divinity School focusing on and honoring the lives of two modern saints: Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen. Merton was a Trappist monk who lived in a monastery in Gethsemani, Kentucky, after finishing at Columbia University. He lived from 1915-1968. He was a prolific writer (over 60 books and hundreds of poems and articles). Perhaps his best known is his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Nouwen lived from 1932-1996. He was a Dutch priest who spent his adult years in the USA. He was another incredible author with dozens of books on spirituality (selling over 8 million copies). He was also a professor at Yale and Harvard Div. schools, but that is not what he considered his most important and final work. Nouwen, like every saint, like every one of us, was VERY human. He was known to be nervous, restless, driven, lonely, and isolated. Those who knew this child of God, say he had deep wounds---which eventually led to a mental breakdown and deep depression. Out of his recovery came his famous book, *The Wounded Healer*. He also supposedly had a deep need for constant love and external affirmation. That would lead him to plunge ever more deeply into finding the source of his belongingness in God. Of that movement, he said, "God did not leave me alone. Instead I learned to listen deeper to the inner voice of God" (the name of another of his books).

After a life in academia, Nouwen felt the call to spend his time living and ministering in a different type of community. He first spent some years at L'Arche in France...a residential community for those with developmental disabilities, and then onto Daybreak in Toronto. It was there that he met Adam. Adam couldn't speak, and couldn't do the most mundane tasks for himself like brushing his teeth or getting dressed. Nouwen felt an assigned mission to this

man and spent hours upon hours caring for this young man: bathing and washing him, feeding him, and so forth. What happened...was an inner spiritual transformation in Nouwen. To him, "Adam was a personal re-enactment of the Gospel story. He bore the silent witness to God's incredible love," because he could literally do nothing without an external source to prove himself worthy. Adam was loved, beloved, just because he was human. From Adam, Henri Nouwen had learned what it meant to be beloved by God--that life itself is a GREAT gift, and we are each loved by name by that God.

Adam died at the young age of 34, and Nouwen, who had been travelling, rushed to his side to grieve his loss. Nouwen died not long after that at the age of 64.

Henri Nouwen's work has been a source of spiritual nourishment to me for over three decades. His willingness and ability to speak transparently from his heart in simple but profound language has spoken to me and to millions of others around the world, bringing people to a greater sense of their belovedness by our common Creator.

Over the last week and a half, I participated in the two community conversations held in the Middlebrook auditorium to listen to the pains and fears of parents in the wake of several incidents of anti-Semitism at the middle school. (There had been two separate incidents of swastikas in the boys' bathroom, and an incident of a male student putting a post-it note on a Jewish girl's locker saying "Jews will burn"-- after a lesson on the Holocaust.) Parents (particularly Jewish parents) were visibly writhing in pain as they gathered. Many said their children did not feel safe going to school. They wanted answers about what would be done.

A representative from the Anti-Defamation League was present and spoke saying their research shows that within the last year, incidents of hate **in Connecticut** have increased by 100%...It's happening out there...but it's ALSO happening here....Where we live.

Some adults have said perhaps there has been some overreaction by school and clergy leaders. I think not. All you have to do is look at the Facebook postings on Wilton 412 to see adults engaged in diatribes which are shredding people apart. It's painful and sad to read the threads. This is not about a difference of opinion. That's fine. These posts attack and characterize people in very derogatory ways.

So why bring this up in church? What is the Gospel message here? What word of hope can we bring? Who we are in here cannot be separated from who we are out there. And who we are out there is connected to who we are in here. The life of Christian discipleship is to try and discern who God calls us to be in each and every situation. As we spend time in prayer and in worship, we open ourselves to be transformed by God, soaking in the knowledge that we are beloved, so that we may be bearers of light, love and healing to those around us.

Let's go back to the Yale Divinity lecture....I was taught a new word yesterday: PROTREPTIK. Perhaps you know it? I didn't. It can be used as a noun or an adjective. It means: an invitation to turn toward a way of life.

When given a chance to ask some questions, I asked, "If Nouwen and Merton were alive today what would they have to say about the current state of things in the US? Mind you, I was asking people who had worked with both men...who have studied their works extensively. The answer was interesting. According to the scholars present, Nouwen and Merton would have been clear about their views, (with gentleness and respect) confronting violence against humanity and the earth ...but they wouldn't judge. Instead they would have been protreptik, inviting people to look inward and be the change they would want to see (to borrow a phrase.) In fact, wasn't that what Jesus did? Change starts first within with an inner transformation based on God's unconditional love for us...then and only then can we have compassion on someone who is hurting and make a change in our outer world.

At the Middle School parents' meeting, there was much interest in finding the identity of this child. In fact at last Thursday's meeting, it was announced that police had made a positive identification. It was also clearly stated, and rightfully so, that his identity would not be made public because of his age. Is the middle school child who wrote the painful note to the 6th grade girl also a child of God worthy and in need of love? Yes, yes, yes, indeed a beloved child of God. The ADL representative reminded everyone at the press conference following that we need to be ready to forgive people when they do things like this. Are the people ranting on different sides of issues in town and in our country with hateful rhetoric children of God and in need of love? Yes, of course....

One of my favorite current theological bloggers is Re. John Pavlovitz. In a recent post, he urges Christians when they feel overwhelmed by outer circumstances not to fall into the trap of sitting back, throwing up our hands and saying God is in control:

"The truth, Christians friends: is that God is not in control of you. You are in control of you and God is asking you to be goodness and love in a way that tangibly changes the story we all find ourselves in. God is asking you what you're willing to do to bring healing and cease pain and show compassion.

Your move." John Pavlovitz

So, so saints, how do you respond to this charge? Fortunately, we know that saints are not goody-two shoes kind of folks...thank God for that, or no one would have a chance! Instead, we are human beings who are God's beloved...God's own...God's children, who are trying to live into that mystery day by day and invite others to do the same (that's being...protreptik).

Praise be to God!