

Come Lord Jesus, touch us with love, life-giving as light,  
to quiet our anger, to soften our fears and soothe the knots of our cynicism,  
to reconcile ourselves to the people around us, to reconcile one group to another,  
to reconcile nation to nation,  
Help us to know that we carry all of the goodness and beauty that you are.

At the risk of stating the obvious we have been through kind of a lot  
over this past year, actually these past 4 years.  
It's been a flood of disease, violence, injustices, and political wrongdoings.  
Some truly awful decisions have been made.  
And along with those decisions have come the consequences.  
And some of the consequences are not just the results of the actions themselves  
but behaviors that once were frowned upon have become almost social norms.  
Lies seem to be no big deal. Adultery (shrug) .  
Even stealing, as in porch pirates, has a kind of adventurous urban flair.  
But below these outward behaviors lie attitudes that are much more insidious –  
distrust, anger, hatred. These too seem to have become norms.  
There have been endless articles  
about how we are to heal the divisions and skepticism  
that run through almost every part of our lives.  
And the virus has just intensified our feelings of isolation and suspicion.  
So we find ourselves, I find myself,  
because this sermon is as much to me as it is to you, in a precarious spot.  
What, you might be thinking, does all this have to do with the readings for today?  
Well, hang in there because there is a thread.  
But first I'd like to just take a moment and look at the Gospel of Mark.

Each Gospel has its own characteristics and themes.  
Mark's Gospel, which is the one we will be reading throughout this year,  
is the most succinct of the 4.  
His Gospel is only 16 chapters long and contains all the important stuff  
and none of the digressions that we find in the other gospels.  
This is the bare bones of Jesus' life and ministry.  
Not for Mark any sentimental stories about mangers and wise men and sheep.  
No, the author skips over all the nice pleasantries of baby and childhood  
and introduces us to Jesus at the ripe age of 30,  
as his ministry begins with his baptism in the Jordan river.  
In the first chapter alone Jesus is baptized, tempted in the wilderness,  
calls the apostles, teaches in the temple,  
heals numerous people and then travels throughout Galilee – Phew!

The author of Mark wants us to know that Jesus was not some idle guru, of the navel-gazing variety.  
He was BUSY, in capital letters.  
And what was he so busy doing?  
What was it that Mark really wanted us to focus on?  
Well, it says right there at the beginning of the Gospel,  
“Jesus proclaimed that ...the Kingdom of God has come near.”  
And Jesus demonstrated the nearness and the nowness of the Kingdom not just with wise words but with his actions, actions like healings.  
Physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional healings.  
The story we heard from Mark this morning is the first healing in this Gospel, where Jesus casts out an unclean spirit.  
This man’s condition has also been called demon possession and Jesus’ action as a kind of exorcism.  
That idea, of being possessed by a demon, led me to think about the nature of evil and humanity’s and God’s participation in it.  
But as I was rolling all those insoluble issues around in my head, I realized that although the nature of evil certainly deserves plenty of consideration, what seemed more pertinent to me was human nature itself, because I know that recent events have left me and perhaps you really struggling with the goodness and badness of human beings.  
Are we basically good or bad?  
Should important decisions about choosing political leaders be left in the hands of the average citizen?  
I have come even to question the wisdom of democracy.  
Can people be trusted to make good decisions?  
My faith in human beings is at an all time low.  
I trust few people and even fewer institutions.  
I am the opposite of Anne Frank whose faith in the goodness of peoples’ hearts was unwavering in spite of the horrors her family went through.  
What kind of a Christian thinks the worst of humanity??  
An Episcopal priest??!!

And my unease was only deepened with the statement of Richard Rohr in his book *The Universal Christ*, “I have never met a truly compassionate or loving human being who did not have a foundational and even deep trust in the inherent goodness of human nature.”

The inherent goodness of human nature. AARRGG  
That felt like a knife in my gut.  
So what can we do when we find ourselves in a place that we know is not right?  
One thing we can do is to walk ourselves back to the beginning and start over.

If we believe that there is an inherent goodness in creation,  
and that goodness was implanted in creation from the very beginning,  
in every bit of the created order, then our default is not badness but goodness.  
Rohr calls that Original Goodness, as opposed to Original Sin.  
Our focus has been on the sin part way too long.  
For some reason we have an easier time  
believing the negative things about ourselves more easily than the positive.  
So when Augustine developed this idea of original sin  
and Martin Luther expanded on it by describing humans as a pile of manure  
and Calvin talked about our total depravity,  
we just nodded our heads and said yep, that's us.  
We are flawed and unreliable creatures.  
God forbid that we should see ourselves as good and capable  
and carrying the imprint of God.  
Brain studies show that we humans are attracted to negativity  
and have to actively embrace the positive.  
Rohr quotes the first letter of John in which the author says,  
"My dear people, we are already the children of God...."  
We are **already** the children of God.  
It shouldn't be a new idea for any of us but it is.  
We are made in the image of God.  
To counter our tendency to dwell on the negative,  
to recover that Original Goodness, Rohr suggests we adopt 3 attitudes:  
A trust in inner coherence itself. It all means something. (Faith)  
A trust that this coherence is positive and going somewhere good. (Hope)  
A trust that this coherence includes us and even defines us. (Love)

A trust that no matter how crazy things get – when anarchy and chaos loom –  
God was, God is, and God always shall be.  
It is our challenge as Christians, as people who proclaim God as creator, redeemer,  
and sustainer to reframe the conversation, to reclaim the real nature of the universe.  
Our foundation isn't fighting and posturing and belittling.  
Our foundation is the deeper truths of faith, hope and love.  
But sometimes, especially times like now, they are so hard to hold onto.

The Kingdom of God has come near.  
It came near at that first healing in the Temple.  
It came near every time Jesus spoke  
and the crowds were touched and changed by his words and actions.  
And, hard as it is to believe, it is here today.  
Creation just shines with the love and goodness that God is.

People who have come to know the joy of God do not deny the darkness,  
but they choose not to live in it.  
They claim that the light that shines in the darkness  
can be trusted more than the darkness itself  
and that a little bit of light can dispel a lot of darkness.  
They point each other to flashes of light here and there,  
and remind each other that they reveal the hidden but real presence of God.

*Henri Nouwen*