

Novena of Grace
Saturday 3.10.18
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We have come to the 8th Day of our Novena. We have been bringing our prayers and desires to God, to St Francis Xavier and to this St Ignatius Community, trusting that God is working in and through us to bring them to fulfillment. We hold each other close. We hold our desires close and we know God is close as well.

Over these days together, we have been exploring the ways we can Embrace Peace in our Broken World. With ourselves, with God, with one another, and with our communities around the world. These are big tasks. They ask us to pay attention and stay focused and stay committed to this work. They call us out of ourselves and into one another. And they ask us to stay there.

This peace we are working toward is not the sweet peace of puppies and kittens and rainbows (although that peace is lovely too!) This is the nitty gritty peace. The peace forged in fire that anchors us and deepens us. The peace that Jesus left us with to sustain us as a community. This is hard peace, and hard won peace, and we have each other to thank for it.

Building these places of peace, tending our flower beds, is important. Jesus calls us into action - to serve and love one another. We are also called to reflect on that action. To recenter ourselves so that we can ensure we are connected to God and God's call for us. To refill our watering cans, so we can go back out and water our seeds of peace and till our garden soil. We are called to be these contemplatives in action, constantly acting and reflecting and re-acting, ensuring we are always re-aligning ourselves to God and God's call for us. But how to take action? Where to start?

When I was preparing to leave for my first year of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps Northwest, my parents gave me a journal with a quote from Howard Thurman that they had put on the inside cover. It said:

"Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

This was exactly the thing I needed to hear at the time. I was feeling lost. I felt a deep need to follow Christ, quite literally, by serving his people. By feeding and clothing and visiting and fighting for the least of us. It sounded so good. So simple. But I struggled to

find a way to do this in a meaningful way that didn't leave me exhausted or overwhelmed into inaction or trying to escape it all and give up entirely. The simple shift from "what does the world need" to "what makes me come alive" and by extension "what gives me life so I can give life to others" was profound. I've spent my time since then trying to tap into those things that truly make me feel alive. And then the service is easy. It comes readily and nourishes me. It becomes part of my prayer. It is God living deep down within me and working through me.

Even when I am doing something that "makes me come alive" I still sometimes feel like I'd prefer to just think about the intangibles. To think about things like peace and love and hope and vulnerability. To ponder them and wonder about them and try to understand them and pray with them. To hold them in my mind. When I was early on in my SEEL retreat, an image came to mind during my prayer time. An image of old-timey dance lessons; of cutouts of shoeprints mapped out on the floor, with arrows and numbers telling me where to put my feet when. Of showing me how to dance a foxtrot or a waltz. First, I studied the shoe prints. I imagined what the dance might look like if I put my feet on those cutouts. I ran through it in my mind. I understood the mechanics and memorized the steps. I even tried to start to practice, using those shoeprints to guide me.

But there comes a point where the cutouts aren't enough. Where we have to move from thinking about dancing to actually stepping on the dance floor and trying to do it. To just dance. To act out what we've been thinking about. To move it from our heads into our bodies. Into our guts. And so it was with my prayer. With my relationship with God. I had to move out of the theory and theology and study and into my lived experiences of God. Of seeing God in the everyday. Of feeling the overwhelming mercy of God. God moved from my head to my heart to my gut, and God unpacked. They have their own room, deep down near my kidneys, I imagine, the Triune God hangs out there. All the time.

Thinking about dancing. Imagining what it might be like. This is not the same as hearing the music. Of feeling it in our bodies and of letting go of the memorized steps and "doing the dance right" and instead letting the rhythm move us. Of letting go of the "how it's supposed to look" and instead, of just doing it. Of dancing. Because thinking about dancing isn't enough. We are then called to take action. To act from the firm footing of knowing we are God's people, that we can feel God's rhythm, that we are doing God's will in the world. We trust that when we let God move in and we we act from this place, working with God to build God's kingdom, we we will be replenished. As the first reading says: "He will come to us like the rain, like spring rain that waters the earth". For when

we are giving our energy in the spirit of God's work, we are ever filled from that boundless wellspring.

I also think this really cool thing happens when we are doing the things that make us come alive. We don't need to shout our successes from the rooftop, like we hear the Pharisee doing in our Gospel today. We don't need accolades for our work. We don't need to be congratulated or praised - that's not why we are doing it. We've left our egos at the door and are instead living humbly the way Jesus has asked us to, knowing that the Spirit is the one doing the real work. If we are paying attention, if we are listening, if we are contemplating, then we will feel freedom to respond to the needs of our world from that place of humility and God's grace, and we will feel fulfilled. "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

We are not called to flaunt our good deeds. We are called to do this work daily, slowly, methodically, so that it may last. We are the garden tenders - watering and weeding and trimming and maintaining peace. And holding each other in the process. We need each other for this. We need people and places where we can bring our vulnerable selves and be replenished. We need best friends and spouses and parents and siblings we can talk to, who won't judge us. We need people we can laugh with. Re-energize with. We need Church and ritual and prayer to reconnect and reflect with our God. We need puppies and kittens and trees and flowers to remind us of God's great love and beauty. We need poetry and literature and comic strips and superhero movies to remind us to be awestruck and imaginative and creative and brave. We need art and music and the occasional terrible reality TV show to co-create and rest in and refill our tanks. We need good work and paychecks and stability so that we can look beyond our daily needs and help meet the needs of others.

This is the work of contemplatives in action. Of men and women for others. Of Peacemakers. We work for Peace. Justice. Compassion. Joy. Hope. And we do it standing firmly in the love of God, egos checked at the door, knowing all we have and all we are are gifts from the one who sent us.

As we begin to bring our Novena days to a close, I invite you to revisit a time in your life when you have felt fully alive. And where maybe that alive-ness was transformed by God into service of his kingdom. And where might God be inviting you next?

And because the poets continue to say it better than I ever could, Mary Oliver writes:

Meditation is old and honorable, so why should I

*not sit, every morning of my life, on the hillside,
looking into the shining world? Because, properly
attended to, delight, as well as havoc, is suggestion.
Can one be passionate about the just, the
ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit
to no labor in its cause? I don't think so.
All summations have a beginning, all effect has a
story, all kindness begins with the sown seed.
Thought buds toward radiance. The gospel of
light is the crossroads of — indolence, or action.
Be ignited, or be gone.*

May these Novena days continue to invite us to take action. To be ignited. To “go and set the world on fire.” And then to return to one another so that we may be nourishment and a resting place for one another. And then may we go forth again. And again. And again.