

Eileen DiFranco's homily

In honor of our 9th anniversary as a community.....
(I left out the opening paragraphs.)

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I believe that we are a testimony to the power of the Holy Spirit who constantly shakes off the chains of outmoded traditions that no longer feed the People of God and builds something new, usually on the margins, beyond the pale of any power but God, a place where as we know, Jesus chose to live. Our little "re-formation" as an intentional Eucharistic community has been a blessing.

And so, it is fitting that we read from the gospel attributed to our founder today. However, this gospel is hardly a happy, conflict free gospel, but then few of the gospels are. Nor are they supposed to be. As in the canonical gospels where James and John fight over who will be the greatest to the point of drawing their mommy into the fray, this gospel too concerns leadership. Who was the leader of the early Christian community? To whom did Jesus entrust his teaching? To the man who denied him three times and rarely understood anything he said? Or to the woman who stood at the foot of the cross and to whom Jesus personally entrusted the good news? Of course, we shall never know for sure, because each of the gospels was written independently for separate and diverse communities, perhaps in honor of their own founder. Consequently, different people are lifted up in different gospels.

However, the conflict in our gospel today does set the stage for one of Christianity's most hallowed but most damaging traditions, sexism- not sex-sexism Christianity's original sin, a sin so great and so pervasive that it has hobbled the journey of the Body of Christ which has been forced by this sin to walk with one leg, see with one eye, and hear with one ear. This insult to the Body of Christ at birth literally broke its heart. Its chronic and severe symptoms and spreading contagion have been masked by those who rename it, explain it away, and more alarmingly, ignore the symptoms, so that it runs like a third rail through the cultures and political systems of every age in all parts of the world, grievously wounding all who come into contact with it.

Let's listen again to some of the words in this gospel. Peter said, "Did Jesus really speak privately with a woman and not openly to us? Are we to turn about and listen to her? I do not wish to believe that the Savior said this."

The great biblical scholar Bart Erhman has often said that a criterion for probable truth in any gospel is the inclusion of stories that seem detrimental to Christian beginnings or to Christian leaders. Surely, this gospel fits the bill since it portrays Peter, the one upon whom generations of Christians have been taught was the rock upon which Jesus allegedly built his church, as a misogynist. Sadly, all of Peter's successors, including the present one, have followed suit, even though the latter sugar coats his message with a smile.

Again from the gospel, "They were divided and argued among themselves. They began to leave separately to proclaim and to preach and teach what they understood to be the words of the rabbi."

Sadly, the words that Peter and his successors understood or misunderstood from the teachings of that equal opportunity lover Jesus, the words that were taught and preached about were that women were inferior to men. This is a great injustice that has yet to be rectified.

I read an article in "Commonweal" magazine about the author C.E. Morgan, whom I never heard of before but who impressively wrote the first draft of an award winning book called "All the Living" in fourteen days. Morgan said that we most often learn about issues like justice and goodness mostly through experiencing their lack. Lacking something important to one's growth, development, indeed, to one's survival, makes things really personal and really hurtful. Some of us here may know what this lack of basic needs feels like through personal experience.

The habitual lack of justice in a person's everyday life, in a nation's life, in a church's life, its power, its scope, its ability to withstand and repel legitimate criticism while refusing to change, its effects on victims and perpetrators alike over long periods of time should literally take our breath away. How can this be? There is little that can mitigate this lack for injustice can never be papered over by thoughts and prayers, happy talk about God's inscrutable plan for the future, or wishes for success in the great by and by when those who were treated unjustly are all safely dead. Time, a studied neutrality so not to offend, coupled with a serene toleration of evil as a fact of life is always on the side of the unjust rather than on the just. Justice delayed is justice denied and God has nothing to do with it.

Even if we never experienced it, we know that injustice, that is a lack of justice, is an ugly, horrid thing often covered up by a beautiful façade of tradition, loyalty, timelessness, wealth, beauty, efficiency, and even virtue and community. Injustice is also often subtle, as the Powers manipulate the variables, inculcating fear and seeding divisiveness in order to perpetuate the injustice- and the myths- that keep them in power. The Powers' favorite by-line when confronted by dissent- which they crush by firings, trashing reputations, banishments, excommunications, and exclusion from the Table- is "How dare they?" or worse, "They had it coming."

In spite of the obfuscation surrounding injustice a victim knows injustice when he or she feels it. The door gets slammed shut in your face or you get slammed over a car door. Your voice is silenced while the Powers yell all sorts of things at you, even when they don't know a blessed thing about you. You get written out of the story, your paycheck yanked. Your concerns are minimized and explained away. In the unjust power paradigm, what you look like means more than what you are. A lack of justice means that you are inferior and you simply have fewer rights- even in 2016.

Injustice has ramifications for its victims. Many times this profound lack of justice and goodness causes grief, perhaps a paralyzing inaction, numbness, bad choices, and anger. But thankfully, thankfully, many more times than not, lack causes people to grow, to become stronger. It enables them to unmask the Powers in their lives for the frauds that they are, throw them off, and to take matters into their own hands as we did at St. Mary Magdalene because the Powers, as we know so very well, have absolutely no motivation to change anything any time soon.

In the midst of the unfathomable lack of justice in the world, there is always good news. The good news is that injustice and its accompanying evil never has and never will have the last word, and, in spite of everything, always, always pales in the light of love and kindness and goodness of the literally hundreds of thousands of people who act justly in many area of their lives, in spite of the cost. The good news is that we are one body, consisting of many different parts to be sure, but a body that functions well only when all parts work together. These parts, Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, are obliged to care for each other because if one part suffers, the entire body suffers. If one part is diminished, every part is diminished. We can never say to a part of our illustrious body, "We do not need you" or "You are not worthy."

And so, we must reconstruct our wounded Body, mend its broken heart and add the eyes, ears, hands, legs, of one half of the population in order to flourish the way God intended. As one whole, healthy body, we can then hold the hands of all of our sisters and brothers all over the world as we pass through this miraculous existence in a good world created by our loving God.

My friends, today, in our little way, we try to correct the unjust omission of the female presence in the church and announce to those with ears, listen! Here are the names of those the Powers made us forget. We are going to say these names loud and clear; Jael and Judith who saved their country, Huldah, the interpreter of words of God, the unnamed daughters of Zelophehad, mentioned twice in scripture who boldly sued to inherit their father's estate, the midwives, Shiprah and Puah who refused to obey Pharaoh, the queens, Esther, and Vashti, who risked their lives for their people, Chloe, the head of an early church, Phoebe, the deacon, Prisca the founder of churches and Junia, the great Apostle. Let us remember Julia, Persis, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Stachys.

And, of course, let us remember our great patron, Mary Magdalene, the very tower of strength upon whom Jesus relied, the one who knew the all, the one who always walked with Jesus and understood what he wanted his followers to do: act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God, all of us, all together, holding hands until we are all safely home.

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Because of our foremothers in faith and the great lovers of humanity who stand up bravely for justice in every generation, we can be a people filled with hope in a time that does not seem hopeful, we can be a people of faith when truth stumbles in the public square. And most of all, we can be a people of love and justice who pledge to protect God's beloved Body from harm.

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