

Sermon: November 27, 2011
"Coming back? ... always been here ..."

Our world lost some grace and class this week ... with the passing of Maggie Daley. Jude and I have talked about her quite a bit over the past couple years ... as we saw her name on the wall of the Maggie Daley Cancer Center at Northwestern Hospital. Just seeing her name is a comfort. Also ... we'd look around at all the folks in the waiting room ... knowing each person has their own story and journey. Maggie Daley ... just like my wife Jude ... would never let cancer define who she is.

I guess everything in life reminds me ----- *life is about religion, and religion is about life.*

Late yesterday afternoon ... two families from our church came together. We stood before our beautiful tree, and they renewed their wedding vows ---- one couple, after 15 years ... another, after 25. Their kids were baptized here ... have grown-up here ... even one of the moms grew-up in this humble place. Both families ... like most of us ... have gone through lots of "stuff."
And ... after all this time ... they come "back to the altar" ... to this place.

All of them talked about how their love for each other ... over time ... has changed. Their love is deeper ... richer ... more rooted in beliefs and values that we too often take for granted ... values and beliefs that endure and stand the test of time.
Without having to say it ... GOD is at the very center of their lives.

I keep thinking of the words ---- "COMING BACK."
The season of Advent is about "coming back."
The church often talks about Jesus' 2nd coming coming back to judge us ... the rapture ----- wherein the righteous are taken to heaven, and "sinners" like me are left behind!@!!
Of course ... there is the ever present ----- "weeping and gnashing of teeth!!"

I can't tell you how much this "stuff" bothers me.
I don't like it when religion "plays games" with people ... when the church uses peoples' insecurity and guilt to get them to "come back."
I admit ---- I get kind-of sad when people leave the church ... for whatever reason.
I sometimes wonder why people come to church for a while ... they seem all excited about the church and their faith ... and then they disappear. Such is life, I guess ... it happens.

But never ... in a million years ... should we ever use guilt, or the fear of God, or the fear of a 2nd coming and judgment ----- as a way for people to find their way back.
I'm sure the good Lord sheds a tear or two ... when he see us (his "children") beat each other up ... when he sees our failure to reach out and to understand and to care about each other.

But ... the "spiritual bottom line" is this ----- JESUS HAS COME BACK.
We don't need to wait for some kind-of rapture ... or 2nd coming ... or judgment day.
In a way ----- *every day is judgment day.*
Every day is come-back day.

It was so clear in the gospel lesson last Sunday. Jesus says ----- when you look into the eyes of someone who is hungry ... or lonely ... or who has been persecuted ... into the eyes of someone for whom life has been unfair and harsh ***this is precisely where you will find me.***

Yes ----- God wants his people "to come back."
He wants us to "come back" to loving each other ... taking care of each other ... living for each other,
instead of just living for ourselves.

I ... and you ... want people to know:
THE DOOR IS ALWAYS OPEN HERE.
The wine is poured ... the bread is fresh ... and no matter how long you have been away ...
you can always come back.

When you were a kid ... who were some of the people you admired the most?
Years ago ... in one of the Sunday School classes ... I asked the kids to list the most important "jobs"
in their little world. Number one: school bus driver. Number two: the lady behind the counter
at McDonald's. Number three: school custodian.
I remember my elementary school janitor ----- MR. JELLIES.
His bib-overalls ... bad hats ... and wrinkled smile. His ever-present mop in his hand.
Just seeing him and talking to him ... it made my world ok.

There is a retired custodian from Prairie School ... and I'm thinking about him and his lady-friend this morning.
I used to see Ron Burke every day. Quinton would go to school ... he would forget something ... I'd bring it to
his school ... and always run into Ron. So humble, so pleasant.
A few weeks ago ... he and Janet show-up in church. He had never been here before.
Today Janet and Ron are at Mayo Clinic ... as she recovers from major surgery for cancer.
She is "coming back" ... but she'll never be able to use her voice again.

For some reason Ron and Janet came here ... "come-back time"????
But ... this is precisely why our door is open.
When Ron called from Minnesota this morning ... I told him we are lighting a candle for Janet.
And, by the way ... Ron ----- Janet will talk again.
Like Maggie Daley ... she will talk with her smile.
Like the lady to whom I'm married ... she will talk with her spirit.

And ... WHEN WILL JESUS COME BACK?
Just look around: ***he is all over the place!***

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