

SERMON for Wednesday, March 29, 2006
I John 3: 11-18

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Giving It All Away

The news from Seattle over the weekend was shocking: a young man walked into a house party and shot and killed five people outright, and then killed himself. The news from Tennessee was shocking: a young pastor's wife was accused of killing her husband and then running away with the couple's two children. The news from Virginia was shocking: Zacarias Moussaoui, on trial for his part in the 9/11 terrorist plot, proclaimed he was going to fly a plane into the White House. The news from Beloit, Wisconsin, was shocking: a woman was found killed in a downtown business office where she was employed. We shake our heads at the tragedies that daily unfold, wonder what went awry in the head and heart of a murderer. And we give quiet and private thanks that we are not among them. We are not among them.

We tiptoe around the outskirts of hate and murder, keeping to ourselves. We are kind, we are polite, we are nice, we are gentle, we are good. And all these we are, generous and caring, seeking peace and justice. This is the way God calls us to be and wants us to be. But when we walk with Jesus, when we go with Jesus to the cross, when we follow Jesus in the kind of absolute love that ultimately means death before it can mean life, we discover that deep within us is a reserved pocket of caution that will not let ourselves give it all away. And what is the *it*, you ask? The world's goods – food, clothing, housing, privilege, education, employment, choices.

The word of Scripture from I John, chapter 3, challenges our assumptions about ourselves: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" I would like to share with you two reflections on that question. "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?"

Jonathan Kozol, a voice in the nation for education reform for the nation's most vulnerable children, wrote in his book, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*, about a neighborhood in the South Bronx of New York City, a terribly impoverished area, and recorded his conversations and observations about the children there and those who care for their future. In the schools, in a few places like the after school center at St. Ann's church, mentored by some good teachers and caring adults, some lives are being changed, but ever so slowly. The sweeping reforms of school and community and joblessness and healthcare are almost nonexistent. Mr. Kozol and local poet and mentor Mr. Castro have a discussion, and mention a young boy of promise named Anthony.

At night, in Mr. Castor's home on St. Ann's Avenue, the poet speaks with pride of Anthony. "The solitary figure of this child touches me tremendously," he says. "His mentality, as you have noticed, is not organized and that is part of his attraction. When he rings my bell, it pleases me. He reminds me by his earnestness of Don Quixote. He brings me his stories and he asks me for a grade. I always give him a good mark because I don't want to discourage him. He told me once, 'If I could not write, I would go crazy.' Well! He likes to overstate things, but there's something in it. Children long for this – a voice, a way of being heard – but many sense that there

is no one in the world to hear their words, so they are drawn to ways of malice. If they cannot sing, they scream. They are vessels of the spirit but the spirit sometimes is entombed; it can't get out, and so they smash it! "But life," he says, "is a complicated school. Not all of the powerful are happy. Not all the children of this neighborhood are sad. There are many who surprise you. They have faces sometimes that are like *luminadas*. Light surround them. No one yet has clipped their wings. I saw a movie once about the children in a concentration camp in Germany. Most of them looked down because they knew they were about to die. Their eyes were hollow. But one little girl – you can't forget the power of her eyes! She did not seem pathetic. There was something different in her gaze. She looked at the camera with these penetrating eyes. We see her only for ten seconds but we can't forget her. There is a light reflecting from her. It is like the illumination of the angels. She tells us, 'There is something in me you cannot destroy.'"

Mr. Kozol continues the dialogue, "I ask him why the children in the Nazi camps came to his mind when we were speaking of this neighborhood. He answers with a caution I have heard from others when a reference to the Holocaust was made. 'It is not the same,' he says. 'But there are some similarities. There is the feeling of eclipse. There is the likelihood of death for many. There is the sense of people watching from outside but seeming paralyzed and doing nothing. And there are the miracles.'"

The juxtapositions of life and death are everywhere, even in the simplest of acts or the withholding of hope. And it is so difficult for us to place ourselves and the dailiness of our lives on such a big scale. I don't want to be overly dramatic, but this love/hate, life/death is big. It is a tremendous responsibility, an almost overwhelming challenge, and the greatest of opportunities. And whether or not we walk with Jesus in this sacred journey is up to us.

The Catholic Worker movement began in New York City in 1933 by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, committed to nonviolence, voluntary poverty, prayer, and hospitality for the homeless, exiled, hungry, and forsaken. Today over 185 Catholic Worker communities continue to protest injustice, war, racism, and violence of all forms. Listen to what Dorothy Day wrote in 1964:

"On Holy Thursday, truly a joyful day, I was sitting at the supper table at St. Joseph's House on Chrystie Street and looking around at all the fellow workers and thinking how hopeless it was for us to try to keep up appearances. The walls are painted a warm yellow, the ceiling has been done by generous volunteers, and there are large, brightly colored ikon-like paintings on wood and some colorful banners with texts (now fading out) and the great crucifix brought in by some anonymous friend with the request that we hang it in the room where the breadline eats. (Some well-meaning guest tried to improve on the black iron by gilding it, and I always intend to do something about it and restore its former grim glory.)

I looked around and the general appearance of the place was, as usual, home-like, informal, noisy, and comfortably warm on a cold evening. And yet, looked at with the eyes of a visitor, our place must look dingy indeed, filled as it always is with men and women, some children too, all of whom bear the unmistakable mark of misery and destitution. Aren't we deceiving ourselves, I am sure many of them think, in the works we are doing? What are we accomplishing for them anyway, or for the world or for the common good? 'Are these people being rehabilitated?' is the question we

get almost daily from visitors... One priest had his catechism classes write us questions as to our work...The majority of them asked the same question: 'How can you see Christ in people?' And we only say: It is an act of faith, constantly repeated. It is an act of love, resulting from an act of faith. It is an act of hope, that we can awaken these same acts in their hearts, too, with the help of God...On Easter Day, on awakening late after the long midnight services in our parish church, I read over the last chapter of the four Gospels and felt that I had received great light and understanding with the reading of them. 'They have taken the Lord out of His tomb and we do not know where they have laid Him,' Mary Magdalene said, and we can say this with her in times of doubt and questioning. How do we know we believe? How do we know we indeed have faith? Because we have seen His hands and His feet in the poor around us. He has shown Himself to us in them...

Most certainly, it is easier to believe now that the sun warms us, and we know that buds will appear on the sycamore trees in the wasteland across from the Catholic Worker office, that life will spring out of the dull clods of that littered park across the way. There are wars and rumors of war, poverty and plague, hunger and pain. Still, the sap is rising, again there is the resurrection of spring, God's continuing promise to us that He is with us always, with His comfort and joy, if we will only ask. The mystery of the poor is this: That they are Jesus, and what you do for them you do for Him."

After the words, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?", our reading for this night concludes, "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." To love Jesus is to journey with Jesus and give ourselves away. We cannot let our brothers and sisters perish. Amen.