



Day 8 | Tuesday, March 15, 2022
Presenter Bill Hallerman

As I have reflected on the readings over the past weeks, I have been thinking about the past 2 years and how in this Novena we all might find renewal and resiliency in these times. There have been 4 words in the reading from Isaiah that I haven't been able to get out of mind and my heart. They are really simple words, buried in the section where Isiah speaks to the rulers of his time to aim for justice and hear the orphan's plea and defend the widow.

The words right before that phrase are these directed harshly at the leaders of his time, "Learn to do good". I have been thinking about what God would have us learn, do, and be in a time so challenging as this one is. Where do I really go to learn to do good?

The readings today start by telling us where not to look. Isiah's condemnation of the leaders of Israel who believe they can please God only with sacrifices and external forms of worship, while the orphans and widows suffer isn't the place. And in Matthew's Gospel hearing Jesus critique The Pharisees and Scribes and the places of honor they seem to love so much, isn't the place to look either.

So where do we look? I think back through my life, and I can see that the moments when I saw God's face most clearly was when he was disguised as one of us, and especially in all those folks in our community who suffer and struggle the most. Maybe that is why Isaiah puts "learn to do good" right next to the orphan and the widow and the justice piece of our faith. Maybe in this Novena we are called to think about placing ourselves in relationship and connection and service and seeking justice for the widows and orphans of our time, and that is where we will find God and renew ourselves in the process. Leonetta talked on last Thursday about the collective experience we are all having right now, the struggles of systemic racism, war, and the great crisis of unhoused people in our community, and the weight that we are all feeling and how hard it is right now. That is certainly true, and maybe this Novena calls to us, even as tired as we are, even as our resilience seems to be crumbling, to move closer to those folks that are poor and suffering the most, and that is where we will find our renewal. They will teach us what "learn to be good" means.

I know they have taught me.... I remember being at a circle of men at the Frist Nations House. First Nations House is a clean and sober house for Native Americans who were previously homeless, and who are in recovery from alcohol and drugs. I sat in on their house meeting with about 8 guys and listened to them in their circle. They talked of the struggles of their lives before they came to the house, their recovery, and what being in community in that house gives them.

The last person to share in that circle was one of the men who was in his 60's. He had been through some tough things in his life, prison, homelessness, violence.

His words were powerful.... He said "what he realized is that God has been there in his life, the whole time, keeping him alive when he should have been dead so many times. I always kept thinking I was in control, but it really was God. God has come through all of this with me, God has brought me through it." How does a Native person living in this country hold and share such a deep faith? We are so used to what we think is being in control of our lives, and I can't think of a time in my lifetime when so many of us have felt not in control. Actually, that is the perfect moment for us to stop and listen and hear Isaiah's words and learn to do good.

When I place myself in community and relationship and connection with folks that suffer, what we actually find is community. On our best days, we are a community of people who are committed to putting themselves in service, finding God there and amazingly finding God so clearly in each other. So many times in the past couple of years it has seemed impossible...but I have leaned on the inspiration that I find in the people who do this work at CCS around me...This community of people around me who let me see what good looks like, lets me taste it and let it wash over me and cover me with its goodness.

It can come to us at the most unexpected and difficult moments. I think of last February, when a troubled person fired a weapon at one of our staff and ended up committing suicide at one of our buildings. All of the staff were outside, while the building was being cleared, and people were holding each other, and supporting each other in the aftermath. At the same time while all of us were feeling all that trauma and stress, a person who was half-dressed and living outside came by yelling and screaming and hearing voices, and then laid on the ground.... the worst part of me is thinking, really, now? But the best part of one of our staff wasn't thinking that... One of our staff immediately sat down on the ground with that person and began talking to him.... I watched our staff person lean in and listen and see what he could do for them. I thought, how can I learn to be that good? In the midst of incredible trauma of that moment for him, he still found a way to listen and reach out to that person. He learned to do good by putting himself there.

What was impactful about that moment is that it teaches us yet again that we hold this common thread of vulnerability as human beings with each other. These are moments when we realize we are all in this world together and that is a gift not a burden. It is the gift that God gives us, even when we are at our most vulnerable, because that is when we are most able to see God and learn to be good. The opportunity in this pandemic is that it has cut away our sense that we are somehow insulated from the suffering of other folks in our community. We now suspect that perhaps we are not.

And we have to learn it over and over and over in our lives, and we have to put ourselves alongside folks who suffer over and over and learn it again. We never know where we will relearn it.... One of the most powerful moments in my life was taught to me by 2 16-year-old Blanchet students.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, I was in Biloxi Mississippi with a group of about 15 students from Blanchet High School. We were at an elderly women's house, which was about 100 yards from the water and had been completely flooded, all the way to the roof. We were there to take everything she owned out of the house and put it in the road where dump trucks would pick it up. She was still grieving for all of this; she talked of how she had lived her whole life there, and how painful it was to watch her things go in the street.

We not only put everything in the house in the street, but we had to take all of the sheet rock off the walls and throw it out in the street as well. Nothing could be left in the house but the 2 by 4 studs, to be treated for mold so that you could rebuild there.

2 young students come up to me...and asked me to come with them.....They took me to a wall that was in the corner of the kitchen and the living room. They said I don't think we should knock this wall out. I said why not, and they said come see what is here. What was there were lines made with a pencil going up the wall with the heights and the names of her kids. They said it just does not seem right to knock this down, should we cut it out as one piece and give it to her..... I said sure.... They cut it out and we went over to give it to her.

They brought it over to her and she burst into tears and grabbed them both and the 3 of them just held each other.... It seemed like 20 minutes that they held each other, and she kept whispering thank you, thank you so much.

I have thought so many times in my life about that day.... About how two 16-year-old high school young women understood so clearly what God wanted and needed them to do. How did they know that that was exactly what they should do? I know they had made the decision to come, to serve, to do it in community and that decision put them in a place where they were open and loving and all about doing good.

In our world, in these times, during this Novena, as hard as it is to see how the voice of God is speaking to us, I encourage you to recommit yourself not just with the reflection and prayer we all need to see clearly, but to put yourselves in service and justice in our community. That is also where we learn to do good and learn to be good. It will shake our illusion of control of our life, and open us to whom we should be and who we really are, vulnerable and wonderful and always in need of God.

As we take the quiet time to reflect now, you may want to think about who has taught you where to look in your life to do good..... and who maybe you have taught, and how this Novena can rekindle that desire to learn to be good and do the work that God calls us all to. There are also reflection questions in your booklet.