

“Nurturing the Spirit While Living in the World”

John 17:6-19

Scott B. Martin – May 24, 2009

Almost everything seems to come with warnings. There are the usual warnings, such those on cigarette packages, that smoking causes cancer. Cold medicines warn we should not take them and drive, because of possible drowsiness. I bought a shirt the other day and the plastic bag it came in warned that it can cause suffocation. No kidding, although why I would be sticking my head in a plastic bag eluded me!

We are surrounded with things that may be hazardous to us in one way or another. After reading today’s gospel passage we might add another warning “life may be hazardous to your spiritual health!” Living in this world can be dangerous to us physically and spiritually. Jesus recognizes this and prays to God on behalf of his followers, **“I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.”** (John 15:15)

Jesus prayer for his followers is given great poignancy by the fact that Jesus himself is about to be betrayed by one of his closest followers, put on trial by the religious leaders in a kangaroo court on trumped up charges, and experience one of the most excruciating deaths anyone can face, crucifixion at the hands of government authorities. Add to this the shadowy forces of evil working in and through all of this and it is little wonder that Jesus viewed the world as being a dangerous place.

Jesus recognizes that these shadowy forces of evil will not stop even after he has left the scene, nor will the world cease to be a dangerous place physically and spiritual. In this prayer Jesus does not pray for himself but for his followers. In the Gospel of John we do not find Jesus anxiously praying in the Garden of Gethsemane for himself. Instead, we find Jesus passionately praying for all of his followers. In John Jesus is not concerned about himself. He is not even concerned about the world at large. He IS concerned about all who are in the Body of Christ in the world, all who are in the community of faith. Jesus prays, **“I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours... And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world,...”** (John 17:9-11a) John wishes to assure us that just as Christ was concerned about his followers while here on earth, Christ is still passionately interceding for us now.

This is a good thing because life can indeed be hazardous to us not only physically but also spiritually. Both the choices we make and the circumstances we sometimes find ourselves in can wear away our spirits and beat us down.

All kinds of things in this world can wear down our spirits: poor health, financial pressures, broken relationships with loved ones, lack of direction, broken dreams, you name it.

This is Memorial Day weekend, the time when we remember the sacrifices of those who have served in the armed forces. We especially remember those who died in this service and rightly so; but today I would like us to consider the sacrifice of those who served and survived whatever war they served in.

War can bring out good things in people. It can help them mature. It can help them find and demonstrate great courage. It can help develop discipline and skills. It can provide a time of intense comradeship. All of this has been testified to by many who have served; but this does not take away from the fact that “War is hell” as General Sherman observed. It places young men, and now women, in situations that are not only hazardous to them physically but also spiritually. It forces them to both see and sometimes participate in great human brutality. It burns scenes that would do Dante’s *Inferno* proud, into their conscious and unconscious minds. It can’t help but change people, and not always for the better.

I ran across a disturbing statistic the other day. Over one million men and women have served in Iraq. Of these it is estimated that one in five have post traumatic stress disorder. That amounts to 200,000 men and women! Add to this number those who fought in Viet Nam and Korea and WWII who likewise have been scarred by war. Even those who do not suffer from PTSD have, I suspect, also been scarred by their experience in ways they may or may not be aware of.

What can be done? Can these hidden wounds to the human spirit be healed? Spiritual wounds can best be healed by spiritual disciplines. Thich Nhat Hanh is a Buddhist monk from Southeast Asia. Twenty years after the Viet Nam war was over he started offering retreats to veterans. Veterans would come to the retreat and practice Noble silence. They also meditated: eating mindfully, walking mindfully, hugging mindfully, and hearing the Bell of Mindfulness.

One of the people who helped with these retreats was author Maxine Hong Kingston. She started offering her own retreats for veterans during the first Gulf war. Along with the spiritual disciplines Hanh offered she encouraged the veterans to WRITE down their stories and share their stories with others in the group. She says that it is her belief that through writing meditation the veterans were “Processing chaos through story and poem, the writer shapes and forms experience, and thereby, ..., changes the past and remakes the existing world.”

Here is the story of one of the participants in Kingston’s retreats. ***(play video clip or continue to read)*** Sandy Scull use to write hiku poems prior going to Viet Nam as a Marine Lieutenant in 1967-68. After his experiences in Viet Nam didn’t write a poem again for thirty years, not until he attend a retreat with other Veterans.

Here is a poem that he wrote, entitled *Sea Salt*.

After the Viet Nam War, I withdrew
To Nantucket: "faraway isle."
Hoping to glimpse the boy
Before spirit fled the body.
Thirty-three miles of ocean exiling me
From homeland offering little embrace.

Me and my dog Christopher. Christ-love
Disguised as loyal canine. We combed beaches.
Working for the island newspaper connected me.
Tides soothed with ebb and flow.
A rhythm I could trust. Even eat by.
I fished the last three hours of the east tide.
Buried my toes in the sand, searching
For the texture of littleneck clam.

When water was warm, I sailed out solo.
Stripped then slid into the sound.
Looking up toward the surface light.
Christopher's gaze wavering with wind
And water between us. Breath bubbles
Rose, bursting under his nose.

My body now embraced,
A ritual purification in salt.
Dismembered dreams floated closer.
Something dissolved in a solution
That held me. Breathing easier,
I could imagine again.

The world, through our choices and circumstances can indeed be hazardous to us physically and spiritually but there are forces in God's universe that can also bring us healing and blessing, even in the midst of brokenness.

Lieutenant Scull found these healing forces in God's creation, in the sun, sand, wind and waters of Nantucket. He found them in, as he put it, "Christ-love disguised as loyal canine". By the way, his dog was aptly named Christopher, which means "bearing Christ inside". He found it in connection to the human race through his work on the island newspaper.

Finally he found in the closing section of his poem in what I can only describe as "baptism" language from his swimming in Nantucket Sound, "My body now embraced, a ritual purification in salt. Dismembered dreams floated closer. Something dissolved in a solution, that held me. Breathing easier, I could imagine again."

In our Gospel passage Jesus makes it clear that he was sent "into" the world to guide and protect us, to draw us closer to each other, to himself and to God. It is Jesus' fervent prayer that this healing, saving union be nurtured and strengthened.

In verse 11 Jesus addresses his Father saying "I am coming to you Holy Father". Jesus then goes on to say that he is "setting himself apart" so that the disciples to "may be set apart. This idea of being "set apart" is directly related to the word for "holy." To be holy is to be set apart.

In Jesus' day the "holy of holies" in the temple was the place where only the high priest could go, and even he only once a year, and only after undergoing ritual purification. When the high priest entered the holy of holies he did so to seek forgiveness for the sins of the Jewish people.

Jesus tells us that he has been sent for this very purpose. He has been set aside, consecrated for this purpose. N.T. Wright believes that **"Now, like the high priest," Jesus "is asking the father to preserve his people from evil, from the tricks and traps of the world. He wants them to be his holy people in the best and fullest sense."**

When the world wears us down Christ is there to pick us up. When our choices and circumstances break our wills and our spirits, Christ is there to heal us and renew us. The world may be hazardous to our spiritual welfare at times but Christ is there to lovingly embrace us and sanctify us. So it is Jesus says, "And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth." (John 17:19) Amen.