

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
February 19, 2006

“THE THREE QUESTIONS”

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ~Isaiah 43: 19

Many would agree that when we hear the name of Russian author Leo Tolstoy, we think immediately of his great tome *War and Peace*, considered a standard in world literature.

Recently I was surprised to discover a children’s book called *The Three Questions* (from which I’ve borrowed my sermon title today) that is based on a story by Tolstoy who said:

If I were told that what I shall write will be read in twenty years by the children of today and that they will weep and smile over it and will fall in love with life, I would devote all my life and all my strengths to it.

The Three Questions is the story of a boy named Nikolai who sometimes felt uncertain about the right way to act. “I want to be a good person,” he told his friends. “But I don’t always know the best way to do that.” Nikolai’s friends understood and they wanted to help him.

“If only I could find the answers to my three questions,” Nikolai continued, “then I would always know what to do.”

When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?

We can turn to our texts today and gain some insight:

The narrative in Mark’s gospel that I just read is one of several New Testament stories of healing, as God’s response to people with great need. In this particular case, it is the need of a paralytic whose friends carry him to Jesus, even lowering him through a roof. These are friends who make themselves streams of healing and promise, and remind us that God’s healing presence has the potential to move beyond our individual lives into the world around us.

When is the best time to do things? We might imagine ourselves in the paralytic’s friends shoes – there are way too many people – we cannot get close enough – and who is this Jesus and what guarantee is there that he is able to do anything about our friend’s condition? We don’t possess the right skills, a confident faith or any for that matter, nor do we have the time. Forget it. No, instead, they found a way and acted, by getting him through a roof. ***Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?***

In this story of the paralytic, we meet someone who is so sick that he can neither seek out Jesus himself nor even wait in the right place for Jesus to pass by. But, thank God, his

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sickness, his disease, his impossible limitations are not the last word. As always, the last word is love—along with compassion, deep commitment, and tremendous creative determination.

How else can we describe those four friends of his? It is they who literally bore him, who literally brought him to Jesus. It is these four friends who were determined that the crowded house, the tightly blocked doorway, and the crowd would not stop them.

Had any of them already been healed by this rabbi? Was that part of the power of their faith? We don't know the answer to these questions. What we do know is that these friends, whatever their past experience, were now making themselves available as agents of healing. They were breaking into this house—tearing off a section of the roof and presenting their paralyzed friend to Jesus. They ran around Galilee with their friend on a stretcher. Why? Because they loved him deeply and believed that there was something far better for him.

Perhaps the healing had begun just by the acts of those friends. Suppose their faith, their courage, their loving, desperate creativity, their intuition, and their single-mindedness had opened the way. We do not know what became of them or their healed friend. The stories do not illuminate that for us.

These kinds of stories or parables may seem all right, as long as we can hold them here within our own small, hurting, personal lives. But what happens when they come face-to-face with our world today? What healing might be available beyond our own particular place?

This quarter I have the great privilege, along with my fellow deans for religious life, Scotty McLennan and Patricia Karlin-Neumann, of teaching an undergraduate course called “Spirituality and Non-Violent Social Transformation.” One of the requirements is for our students to spend at least 3 hours per week working with a community service organization engaged in social transformation. It is our hope that by doing this, some bridge is formed between the theoretical and the practical.

On a brisk afternoon this week, sitting with a bowl of hot soup, I had the opportunity to read the first of their service learning journal entries. As I read, and began to see between the lines written on the pages before me, it was more than the soup that brought warmth, sustenance and comfort to me. Ranging from organizations that work to end homelessness, prepare anti-war vigils, empower immigrants through acquiring English language skills, address systemic issues that impact affordable housing, health care, and education or offer a warm meal and shelter to lift the spirits of those in need – I felt tremendously encouraged and filled with hope. It was here through the experience and words of these students –stressed, uncertain and overwhelmed themselves – that I saw stretcher-bearers, whether they have fully realized it or not. But as one student wrote: “As someone who has always been frustrated by feeling like a “jack of all trades, master of none,” I began to realize how valuable my oddly assembled skill set could be.” And

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still another wrote: “We volunteers were like open antennae, as we served food that morning, both receiving and transmitting such an effortless goodwill, that it made me realize that the human ability to relate and inspire cannot be underestimated.” I came to realize that however and whenever these students could, they were being given a chance, albeit in small or seemingly insignificant ways, the opportunity to be healers, those bearing stretchers and tearing through proverbial roofs in their own right.

Our holy texts and our interactions with a needy and complicated society remind us that no structures made by humans are forever. Therefore, it may be that some roofs will need to be torn out, some doors knocked down, some windows broken through, in order for us to bring our paralyzed sisters and brothers, our paralyzed communities, our paralyzed nation and globe in touch with a healing power.

Vincent and Rosemarie Harding, longtime civil rights activists and champions for peace and justice said this:

“Who are the paralytics among us? People are doing all kinds of things in our name and we feel absolutely paralyzed to do anything about it. We can be full of cynicism and despair. Our nation is also paralyzed, and our leadership is paralyzed—saying and doing everything except what needs to be said and done for the healing of the nation.” (*and the world*)

Is it possible that some of us are meant to pick up our leaders? Are we meant to pick them up, recognize and challenge a paralysis of conscience? Maybe we simply have not seen ourselves adequately as the stretcher-bearers, as the ones who have the potential to offer streams of hope and healing.

Look at all the paralyzed communities around us, some of which we live in—communities paralyzed by fear, by poverty, by violence, by a love of possessions that prevents taking any risks for anything. Look at our own nation, paralyzed and stuck in crippling ways.

So people say, "Here's a stretcher, and there's the house; what are you going to do about it now?" The question is, are we ready to break in? Or to break out? What are we going to need to break loose? What are we going to have to change? What structures are going to have to be really transformed for us to do the job that has to be done? When the peace of the 21st century depends on some kind of accommodation between east and west where tensions and misunderstanding run exorbitantly high, is it no wonder a political cartoon turns into mayhem?

And when we ask these questions it's not all our struggle. We are also preparing other generations of non-despairers, generations of stretcher-bearers, generations of people who will dash right through the crowd, down through the roof. The next generation is the extension of our hope, our faith, and our future.

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We would do well to consider the words of the prophet Isaiah today: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." Isaiah writes about a people so excessively in love with past times they have completely misunderstood the present tense. These ancient Israelites, 600 years later loved to talk about the exodus and God's powerful but past interventions. And so it goes on as a community of memory, about the wonderful long ago when somebody did something special. Perhaps we can relate to that today and long for days gone by.

"No one really knows the shape of the newness," wrote one scholar. "That is what produces the uncertainty and anxiety. In all the great, public, missional issues we live for awhile between the times until God's spirit leads us into a freshly formed life together." This anticipation of God's newness requires alert watching. It also requires action.

What is the best time to do things? Now. Who is the most important one? The one next to us. What is the right thing to do? Do well for those around us, near and far.

Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, a network of houses of hospitality for those who live on the edges of our society and our world said this:

I believe some people – lots of people – pray to the witness of their lives through the work they do, the friendships they have, the love they offer people and receive from people. Since when are words the only acceptable form of prayer?

For those called to be stretcher-bearers, we must have hope and confidence in the fact that new things can and will be done in our midst. Even despite us. That God, working through and among us, can fashion a new pattern of social relations in which privilege will have to attend to poverty, in which power will have to submit to pain, in which advantage will have to be recruited for compassion, in which old priorities will have to be repositioned in order to let in people long kept out.

Finally, when we ask, "Where will I find the strength, the grace, the faith, the power?" Let us consider that one way is here before us at least twice per month in Memorial Church. It is why we offer holy communion, why we believe an ancient sacramental ritual has its proper and transforming place among us. I want us to think of it as more than rote, habit, or tradition.

This is a holy table, a ritual that allows us to engage in the symbolism of coming forward and participating in the life of Christ, participating in the power of hope, healing, justice and love. That's what this holy feast is for. And while it is certainly not enough to quench our thirst, nor enough to fill our stomachs, perhaps it is enough to renew us day after day—to bring faith, to bring transformation, to bring grace, to bring hope, and to do it with one another.

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That is what Love Divine is about. It is remarkable that we are here. It is humbling that it is available to us. Needless to say, the God of the table asks us to go from the table, not just to where we are sitting, but out to the hurting places, and to see visions of a new thing among us, to look for ways to be those bearing stretchers, to walk without despair, to imagine what is still to be. Because God is not finished with us yet.

Come to the table. Then go from the table, knowing that you are held. This is the great message of those magnificent stories of faith. The healing that is for us here is for all, everywhere. Let it spread, let it pour out, let it manifest in us, so that we can no longer hold it to ourselves. Because an enduring God still has unimaginable things in mind for us.