

June 29, 2014 Jeremiah 28: 5-9, Psalm 13, Matthew 10: 40-42

JUST A CUP OF COLD WATER

What an exciting time of year it is for so many people. Now I am not talking about the excitement of having a very long weekend, for those who get to take Monday and Tuesday off, or the people cheering for their favourite soccer team, but it is exciting for those who are graduating after years of study. While riding my bike on Friday I passed some students heading home, probably graduating from grade 8, all decked out in fancy dresses and freshly bought suits, animated and excited about celebrations they had been part of. This time of year, it is very busy around the UOttawa campus as students, parents and professors have been attending graduations for graduate and undergraduate degrees. Part of the process of course is listening to one last lecture in the form of a commencement speech.

One of the great ones from this year's speeches was given on May 27 from Joyce DiDonato, a famous opera singer, at the Juilliard School of Music where she was receiving an honorary doctorate. I want to share a few of the highlights of the hard won wisdom that she shared with these young artists who were getting ready to take on the whole world:

[The Juilliard School's 109th Commencement Speech ~ Joyce DiDonato](#)

Look at you! You are gowned and tassled and you're ready to take on the world! Through that first nerve-racking audition, all those subsequent sleepless nights, the painstaking preparation for your recitals, the endless hours of reed-making and memorization, the blisters and the tears, and now here you walk side by side with the life-long friendships you have now forged, you are about to be Alumni of the acclaimed Juilliard School!

I offer these four little observations as tools to perhaps help you as you go forward, enabling you to empower yourselves from the very core of your being, so that when the challenges of this artistic life catapult and hurl themselves directly and unapologetically into your heart and soul – which they will do, repeatedly – you will have some devices at your disposal to return to, to help you find your center again, so that your voice, your art and your SOUL will not be derailed, but you will instead find the strength to make yourself heard, and seen, and FELT.

You will never make it. One of the greatest gifts you can give yourself, right here, right now, in this single, solitary, monumental moment in your life– is to decide, without apology, to commit to the JOURNEY, and not to the outcome. As an artist, you will never arrive at a fixed destination. THIS is the glory and the reward of striving to master your craft and embarking on the path of curiosity and imagination, while being tireless in your pursuit of something greater than yourself.

A second truth:

The work will never end. This may sound dreadfully daunting – especially today when you are finally getting out of here!!!! But what I have found is that when things become overwhelming,.... the way back to your center is simply to RETURN TO THE WORK~ always return to your home base and trust that you will find your way again via the music, the pulse, the speech, the rhythm. **All it asks is that you show up**, fully present as you did when you first discovered the magic of your own artistic world when you were young.

It's not about you. This can be a particularly hard, and humbling lesson to face – and it's one I've had to continue to learn at every stage of my own journey. The truth is, you have signed up for a life of service by going into the Arts. And the life-altering results of that service in other people's lives will NEVER disappear as fame unquestionably will..... you are here to serve humanity.

You are a servant to the eager, naïve, optimistic ones who will come behind you with wide eyes and wild dreams, reminding you of yourself, as you teach and shape and mold them, even though you may be plagued with haunting doubts yourself, just as your teachers likely were – and you will reach out to them and generously invite them to soar and thrive, because we are called to share this thing called Art.

The world needs you.We need you to help us understand that which is bigger than ourselves, so that we can stop feeling so small, so isolated, so helpless that, in our fear, we stop contributing that which is unique to us.. ...We need you to remind us what empathy is by taking us deep into the hearts of those who are, God forbid, different than us – so that we can recapture the hope of not only living in peace with each other, but THRIVING together in a vibrant way where each of us grows in wonder and joy. We need you to make us never lose sight of the fact that we are all in this together and that we are all deserving of a life that overflows with immense possibility, improbable beauty and relentless truth.”

Replace the term Art with ministry and you can see why I found this speech to be so interesting. It reminds of the inspirational speech that Jesus gives to his disciples when they are being sent out on their mission to continue carrying on the ministry that he has begun. We could imagine that chapter 10 in Matthew's gospel is like Jesus' commencement speech to the twelve apostles as they are sent out to gather the lost sheep of Israel. “As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals, or a staff.....wherever they go they are to travel lightly and rely on the generosity of others.

The first truth that they are to practice is that they are **wholly dependent on God** whose presence will be known in the generosity of strangers. And where they are not welcomed, they are to consider that God is not in that place, shake the dust off their feet and travel on. If we could live the practice this discipline, it would certainly help us to keep from collecting a whole lot of muck on our feet and in our hearts and spirits.

The second lesson that Jesus' has for his disciples is that the **work is going to be hard** – “see I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves.” (Sounds like words from someone who has been through an election campaign!) Jesus pulls no punches about what to expect – conflicts, rejection, possibly persecution. These words are not usually spoken to seminary students at their graduation, nor to confirmands, except maybe on a larger global scale as we are encouraged to get involved in current justice issues.

However, in one of my roles a few years ago I spent a few years visiting with new ministers after their first year in the pastorate and so many of them were distraught by the amount of conflict and struggle that they encountered in working with people not only in the community, but in their own churches! Someone should have told them to take Matthew 10 a bit more seriously. Jesus reminded his disciples to take note at what happened to him as he began proclaiming the kingdom of God and not to be surprised when we find there is resistance to the message, for the work of the Christian is no different than the work that Jesus' did – both are of equal value. Of course, Matthew's listeners, who live about 30 years after the crucifixion of Jesus, surely know what the implications of their work could mean.

The third lesson has to do with staying strong in your wisdom **and learning how to discern the truth**, discerning who are true prophets and who are not, learning how to stand up to those who would criticize and try to hurt you, destroying the message and the gifts that God has given you to share. This is the kind of lesson that is illustrated in the Jeremiah reading today as that prophet stands up to the false prophet Hannaniah is who all about easy to hear messages, that promise the moon but don't deliver on the real goods, the real truth, a real conversion that will lead to abundant life. As in ancient days, there are many Gods to worship, especially the gods of Baal, the God's that promise constant satisfaction for whatever human needs you have, whether that is sex, money, fame, or power. Jesus' is promising that there is strength and courage in staying focused on your relationship with God. “So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows”. You are as valuable to God as Jesus was.

The fourth lesson is probably one of the toughest in the gospels, for it is about **losing your life, to find it- it is about becoming vulnerable**. It is about continually examining who you are going to worship, what relationships are going to be at the core of your being so that you can be sustained throughout your life's journey. Jesus even goes as far as asking his disciples to let go of the kindred relationships with their families – “whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.....”

Of course, as the disciples set out for a pilgrimage across the country, they did have to leave their families behind, for a time anyway.

Jesus seems to whittle away all the excess baggage we may have in our lives, to help us look into the core of our being – to clear away too much stuff, false gods, false values, to shed that which prevents us from growing closer to God – even valued relationships. For me the sentiment is captured to some extent in Bob Dylan’s famous song - *You gonna have to serve somebody*:

You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls.

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

It is not unlike Joyce DiDinato’s comment about **“it’s not all about you”**. When you became an artist, you signed up for a life of service.

So now that the follower of Jesus and his message of unconditional love knows that this life involves dependence on God and real vulnerability, he comes to his final lesson about surviving through the **welcome and care of others**. An old Rabbinic saying says that “whoever welcomes another person is considered as though they had welcomed the divine presence.” The giving and receiving of hospitality and welcome of others is at the heart of divine love – in the flow of giving and receiving. When you become as dependent and vulnerable as Jesus is suggesting his disciples become, then you really do understand the value of receiving even a cup of cold water – having your thirst quenched by another person. This is your reward and yet it is so far away from what we all strive for – independence, invincibility, more stuff than we actually need... so that when we do agree to give away our things, our money, it won’t cause us any pain at all. What a long way many of us would have to come in order to be needing and even welcoming the simple gifts of others –even a cup of water – this is your great reward!

After all the lessons that Jesus gave to us disciples, it all boils down to the act of giving or receiving a cup of cold water. It seems so simple, yet we know in our souls how hard it can sometimes be to have thirst truly quenched. God knows what you really need. In the summer days and weeks ahead of you, in the visiting of family and friends, in the generous acts of hospitality, in the times you relax and share a cool drink on your porch or on a park bench, may your spirits and souls be healed and inspired, refreshing you for the journey ahead, for as Joyce DiDinato tells her students - ***The work will never end*** and most importantly - ***The world needs you***, so take your empty cup in your hand, and get ready to be filled!

