

As we approach the one-year anniversary of this pandemic that feels as though it has been with us for far longer, I imagine that you are continuing to feel a wide array of emotions as I do. One moment you are feeling pretty good about having made it this far; you may feel full of hope and want to throw your hat in the air, singing, “We’re gonna make it after all!” But then the next you may reflect on these past many months and feel a great deal of tremendous grief and loss — of so many lives lost and being unable to celebrate them as we normally would, and of course we grieve the loss of countless other gatherings and celebrations with loved ones and friends that never took place.

Our emotions are such fickle things which is why we can be pulled one way and then the next with such ease. Many people know really well how to play with our emotions, and I would guess that by and large, most of us don’t like being played like that. We need to be careful of those who woo us with their words and pull us into their orbit, not truly caring for us but only wanting to use us. For some reason the white witch from C.S. Lewis’ book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* comes to mind as she wooed the innocent boy Edmund with her Turkish Delight candy. Words do have power, to be sure.

Yet just as words can be used in corrosive and dangerous ways, to manipulate, so can they be used constructively and lovingly. An example of this is a postcard that I received from an organization that I support, the Human Rights Campaign. It said, “Jonathan, you are brave bold kind proud courageous fierce strong determined inspiring loved.” It didn’t matter to me that they had most definitely sent that same card to thousands of others. I kept it because no one had ever said all those things to me at one time and it makes me feel good to read it.

So you may be wondering, where am I going with this? Well, first of all, I hope that you also know yourself as “brave bold kind proud courageous fierce strong determined inspiring loved.” I am not telling you that because I want something from you but because I believe that God has made it so... and I thought you too might like to hear it. Now if you have a difficult time hearing that and accepting those words, I wonder why. If it’s because there’s a whole ‘nother set of positive, beautiful adjectives that might fit you even better, I am good with that because each of us is unique, to be sure.

But when trouble and difficult times arise, it is all the more important that we hear and accept love from people close to us. And if they aren’t able to offer it, try to

focus on those who do. After writing that, I just had what feels like an insight. I have generally pushed back when people have referred to the church as their family. But maybe they say that because they feel more accepted and loved here than in their own family. And if that is the case, while that is truly lamentable on one level, it is also a blessing to know that we as the church can be that second family for one another.

Well, in thinking about all of this, and our need to refocus our attention on things that matter most and on things that bring life during dark and difficult times, I came across this poem from a collection by James Kavanaugh. The book is titled, *Will You Be My Friend?* and it is from 1971 (so please forgive the sexist language). The title of this particular poem is called,

*The Earthquake Came*

One sullen day the earthquake came  
To place the world among the planets,  
Full of heat and rage and feebleness.  
The earth sucked in her breath,  
Sighed in discomfort,  
And stretched her arms to ease the pain.  
Man forgot payments and profits,  
And, with new priorities, only remembered  
To cling to his wife and children  
As when the world was young,  
For suddenly life was more than ritual or raiment.

The tall buildings swayed and moaned and begged  
A drop of lamb's blood on the lintel  
To keep away the earth's avenging angel,  
While the little houses only shook and trembled.  
The streets were filled with people  
Hoping to find courage and comfort from those  
They had scarcely noticed before when  
Fear held them apart— until a greater fear  
Dissolved the lesser one in longing.  
And for a moment man could find no place to lay his head  
Save near his neighbor.

Amid the terror of the streets,  
The rubbery rolling of the ground,  
There was a gentleness and caring.  
Then the earth settled back

Content to rest a little longer  
And carry man against her bruised and ancient breast,  
As when the world was young.

Sadly and quite tragically, our lives seem to require an earthquake, or a tornado, or a fire or flood before we are able to “forget payments and profits and, with new priorities, remember to cling to our spouse, our children, and our wider family as when the world was young.” For many of us, this pandemic is just such a time. We are realizing that life is “more than ritual and raiment.” We are seeking and

Hoping to find courage and comfort from those  
[We] had scarcely noticed before when  
Fear held [us] apart— until a greater fear  
Dissolved the lesser one in longing.

In today’s Gospel lesson, we hear a story that I believe demonstrates this quite well. We are given a pretty strange role model however. The main character, (aside from Jesus), is a Roman centurion. This man who, by the way, we never actually meet in the story, is very... different (shall we say). Because even though the ancient Roman writer, Persius, called centurions “uneducated, uncultured blobs of humanity.” And even though it is not at all a stretch to imagine that most centurions were hardened men, soldiers who had proven themselves worthy in battle and therefore given authority over a hundred or more men. In spite of that, the man in our story, seems nothing like those descriptions. Based on his reaction to his slave’s illness and the Greek word used for this slave whom he valued highly, we may well wonder, was this slave like a son to him(?) or perhaps the relationship was even closer than that. Whatever the case, the compassion that he demonstrates leads him to send some Jewish elders to find Jesus so that his slave might be healed. They tell Jesus, “He is worthy of having you do this for him for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.” Certainly this was a unique man — he is appreciated even by the leading Jews who typically despise the Romans!

Going back to the poem, *The Earthquake Came*, I cannot help but wonder, is this centurion experiencing an earthquake of sorts? As,

The tall buildings swayed and moaned and begged  
A drop of lamb’s blood on the lintel  
To keep away the earth’s avenging angel,

This amazing centurion... rather than pushing people different from himself away in his time of need, he seems eager and willing to admit his weakness and he pulls people in. But notice that they willingly do so because he has already built relationships with people outside his usual orbit. So in the midst of his earthquake, when he hears that Jesus is in the area,

Amid the terror of the streets,  
The rubbery rolling of the ground,  
There was a gentleness and caring.

I described the centurion as amazing but in truth, I am just repeating what Jesus says about him. Did you realize that this is the only example in all of the Gospels that Jesus is amazed at another person? Every other time it is the crowds or the disciples who are amazed at Jesus! So we'll be doing really well if we not only pay attention to this man's faith but seek to emulate it.

At Easter, we also experience an earthquake. Do you recall how Matthew records it at Jesus' resurrection? "As the first day of the week was dawning, suddenly there was a great earthquake; for the angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised!"

God can and will take our earthquakes and transform them from death to life. The story of the centurion ends with the message, "When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health." God does not give up on any of us. God will keep coming to us. God will continue to accept us; whether we have great faith like the centurion or little faith the size of a mustard seed. Even if you try to send friends telling Jesus, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof..." Jesus finds you worthy and wants you to hear that you truly are "brave bold kind proud courageous fierce strong determined inspiring loved." Whether it be through an earthquake or by simply hearing God's word of forgiveness, accept God's transformative gift for you this day. Amen.

Narrative 3.2 Luke 7:1-10 (11-17)

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