

Seeking God in Chaos: the Gift of Gratitude

A blog by the Rev. Jane Cornman

It was a rainy, grey day. I needed to leave home by 7:30 am in order to get to a three-hour meeting in Cherryfield. It was a meeting I always look forward to – a clergy support group that helps me maintain sanity and gain perspective. But as always, the daily challenges of family and work had me hopping. Here's a snapshot (or maybe a slide show?) of what my morning looked like: dry the hair, pausing to jot sermon ideas. Feed the pets. Respond to three two-day-old emails. Get out food to defrost for dinner. Interrogate the adolescent about his responsibilities and chauffeuring needs. Sign the permission slip. Hug and kiss the adolescent and watch out the window as he barely catches his bus. Carefully respond to an email from an upset parishioner. Throw on clothes. Slap on makeup while jotting more sermon ideas. Run over to the office and toss stewardship thank you notes into the bag so Kerry can mail them. Run back home. Put the dog out. Check the tire that always goes flat. Put the dog in his kennel. Don't forget the knitting. Hop in the car. Stop at Ben's, pause to greet community members, and put air in the tire. Wonder if it's too early to call the architect. No cell phone service. Sit through three different traffic stops for tree and road work, making phone calls when there's service and reflecting on the sermon when there isn't.

So often, my life feels like I'm juggling multiple objects while simultaneously running through a course of hurdles. There always seems to be too much to do, and too little time to do it. Taking a morning out of the office for something as seemingly selfish and unproductive as a clergy support group is not easy, and can feel almost irresponsible. But I stubbornly cling to something that is more important than all of the tasks that need to get done: my belief that all of us need to make space in our lives for Christian fellowship, for listening to God, and for spiritual reflection. This is why I was trying to write a sermon, respond to my parishioners' concerns, do household chores, tend to my child's needs, get myself dressed and out the door, maintain a vehicle, drive, and keep a church renovation project moving, *all at the same time*. It was so I could carve out some space for God. After all, how can I teach my parishioners about the importance of this practice if I don't practice it myself?

About halfway to Cherryfield, I remembered the ball I had dropped: the half-edited Sunday bulletin was sitting on my desk, and Kerry was going on vacation the next day. If I didn't find a solution before I went into my meeting, she would be unable to correct and photocopy the bulletin until so late that she'd have to stay after work. I called and left a detailed message about what she should do. Twenty minutes later, she managed to get a text to me, saying that my message had been so garbled she couldn't understand anything I'd said. I spent the rest of the drive failing to find spots with enough service to get a call through. I finally arrived at my destination, pausing in the parking lot to try sending a detailed text message. "Message failed. No service." I tried and tried, but I couldn't get through to Kerry.

At last, my ability to keep juggling and hurdling with a cheerful attitude broke. I arrived at the meeting jangling with negativity. The weather was horrible. Work was too busy. I had let Kerry down. I didn't have time to make time for God. I didn't have time to make time for myself. Still, I put on my socially acceptable cheerful face and greeted my fellow clergy. After a little bit of

small talk, our leader opened the meeting by inviting us to enter into an extended period of silence. “Great,” I thought, “Now, instead of the refreshment and renewal I was hoping for, I can sit here quietly stewing in all of my frustration with God.” I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and ... and suddenly I was filled with an overwhelming sense of well-being and immense gratitude.

People often describe hearing God’s voice. I’ve never heard God speaking to me in words, but I do occasionally have these moments where something so clearly from outside of me comes in and lovingly straightens me out. This was one of those moments. All of my responsibilities and frustrations vanished. And from that place of peace and gratitude, I found myself compelled to name one thing after another for which I was thankful. Whenever I couldn’t think of anything else, I’d get what felt like a little mental nudge, and another blessing would present itself so I could give thanks for it. When we finally broke our silence, I was in the place of refreshment and renewal that I had so deeply craved. The need for false cheerfulness had been replaced with genuine grace, love, and peace.

Prayer doesn’t always happen that way. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that it hardly ever happens that way. But it *does* happen, usually when we’re not expecting it. And at the risk of producing the guilt trip which is NOT my intention, I have to say that it happens more readily when we carve out regular time and space to be with others in reflection, prayer, and worship. And, counter-intuitively, “wasting” that time, which could have been spent more productively completing tasks, seems to help everything else fall into place. Shortly after our prayer time, my phone began blooping and bleeping with multiple notifications as the clouds opened and cell phone service returned. Kerry got my texts and the bulletin got done on time. When I left the meeting, I discovered that I had forgotten to turn off my lights in my earlier texting frenzy, and my battery was dead. A few hours ago, this would have been the icing on top of a horrible morning. Now I was calm, and the dead battery became an opportunity to laugh and spend a little extra time with the very kind friend who jump-started my car.

It is never easy to carve out time for listening to God. It is never easy to let go of the personal goals that keep us from spending more time praying, studying, and worshipping with other people of faith. But it is well worth it. I hope that as summer comes and life on MDI becomes even more frenetic, all of us will make the time to listen for God.