

Proper 24

Matthew 22:15-22

It's so good to be home and back in this community. The journey to Palestine and Jerusalem was awesome and provoking and surreal. I still cannot imagine nor comprehend what it must feel like for Palestinian Christian and Moslem families to wonder every minute of every day if Israeli soldiers will burst into their homes and take them over – whether it's for hours or for days or forever. It happened only hours before we visited a school in Saffa, and it happened in that same place a few days later when the homes of three families were "captured."

The money we delivered from this parish – from the Global Ministries auction a year ago – was accepted with such humility and gratitude. No matter where we were, we were received with great welcome, with breads and falafel and herbs and fruits and juices, and with very dark, intense, and addicting Arabic coffee. One does not decline these offerings, even if a big meal was eaten prior to these visits.

The moneys you all contributed to these institutions make a significant difference in their daily lives – financially enabling a step further in the construction of a school and the surety of fuel oil and heat for another school; providing much needed medical supplies for a hospital that treats everyone and where no guns are allowed; and providing special services in a school for children who have physical disabilities and otherwise would have no place else to go.

Our American dollar suddenly seemed to worth something – certainly three shekels to a dollar was a nice surprise in a fantasy sort of way. I found myself treating shekels as I do pennies – a small annoyance. I emphasize small because a shekel is the tiniest coin I have ever seen. Even a half-shekel is considerably larger. But that little does, I learned, have considerable value to those who can't afford to toss their change in a jar at the end of the day.

Our American way of life – not only the comfort of homes or of shelters, the accessibility of food and communication and even jobs, regardless of how low paying they might – became a little dearer to me. But our American way of life – its relative safety and freedom from violence and freedom from fear – became so apparent to me. And it became even clearer that we are blessed with so much more than we can imagine – blessings that we either take for advantage or don't even realize exist.

What amazed me most, though, was what kept the Palestinian Christians and Moslems and Jews alive and looking forward was their deep hope. Not a hope that related to a material desire but a foundational and essential hope that allowed them to consider the possibility of safety for their family night and day; a hope that brought them to a border crossing every day where they might or might not be allowed to cross so they could get to their jobs; a hope that gave them the vision to look to the future for their children with the possibility of a better life, a life free from violence and open with opportunities. This is not a hope that sounds like, "Oh I wish we lived a safer life" or "I wish this violence would stop." What these people possess is a hope that is deeply based in a faith that allows a deep hope, a faith that fits the definition offered by Paul in his letter to the Hebrews: "Faith is the assurance of things hope for, the conviction of things not seen. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible." That is a faith-based hope that gives life, a faith-based hope that is able to stand up to violence and fear, a faith-based hope that makes possible the ability to live each day in some semblance of 'normalcy.' It's not a foolish hope but a responsible hope that a time will come when peace will be the norm rather than the constant fear of siege that is currently the norm. It's a hope that I saw in the fingering of Moslem prayer beads and in the thanksgiving over a Christian meal.

That has been my context as I come back to you and prepare to talk about a yearly stewardship and pledge campaign. We have so, so many blessings – our lives are lives that are not in daily physical danger, we have so many nets under us provided by government and non-governmental groups, we can look forward

with safety, with water and food, with schools, with hospitals close by, with so many privileges that are really not enjoyed by so many in other parts of the world. In fact, even those who are in need in our islands, have safety nets provided by organizations that offer food, shelter, clothing, and education. As a community we all participate in providing these necessities. Not only because we're a bunch of do-gooders who have extra money lying around in declining stock market accounts or even in off-shore accounts (!), but because we recognize that there are always those who have less than we do. Jesus said that we will always have the poor with us – let me juxtapose his statement with his teachings that bless those who are poor in spirit and or who mourn or who hunger or who are persecuted. They will always be with us.

This is a community that has found a way to balance inreach – caring for our own members – with outreach – caring for those in the surrounding community and in the world. We recognize that the blessings we have are not only from our hard work to provide for our families and ourselves, but our blessings are a result of the gifts God has given us to be excellent medical and legal professionals and excellent craftspeople and educators and social work professionals and healers and administrators and government workers. Those gifts that God has given us are gifts that not only provide for our families but are gifts that we share with those who have less. That's a big part of who we are when we accept the vocation of Christian. We understand that we cannot do all we do on our own and that God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit plays a significant role as we take advantage of the gifts we have been for the good and health of creation.

As we move into this next year, we will all be taking a new and careful look at how we allocate our financial resources in this time of financial turmoil. There continue to be mortgages and utilities and car expenses and tuition costs and food costs. There continue to be concerns over retirement funds and savings. I sat with our senior warden and treasurer and clerk yesterday, listening to an update on parish finances. It was sobering to say the least. But keeping in mind my experience of the past three weeks and knowing that all things are possible with God, I have to say that I still have great hope for this community – a hope that is based in our common faith. We have to watch our investments very closely and make some responsible decisions as we move forward. We also have to find a way to maintain our inreach and outreach ministries – as a community, individually and collectively, we continue to be blessed in ways that others will never experience. As a community, we have a safety net that we hold for each other. That is what a Christian community is about. We cannot be so fearful that we hoard what we have, whether as individuals or as a community, and not reach out. **So this year's campaign is low-key.** We are asking three things: **One**, that you either maintain your current pledging level or increase it by at least 5%. For many, this amounts to a couple of dollars a week. **Two**, that those of you who have did not pledge in 2007, pledge. There are almost fifty potential pledging units in the parish that did not pledge for 2007. That's a lot. Please pledge so we can be as responsible as possible as we craft our 2009 budget. And **three**, that you return your pledge cards in the next two weeks so we can begin budget preparation and make some decisions about how our resources will affect and support the ministries of the parish. I am asking that everyone in this parish make a financial commitment to support the ongoing ministry of St. Clement's in our community and to the world.

I say all of this to you in the context of a great hope that comes out of our common faith and a hope that has been strengthened by the privilege that has come with connecting with those whose lives are lived in the context of their faith-based hope as they struggle even to stay safe from harm. I was and continue to be amazed at the hope they place in their creator and I pray that we can feel at least a little of that as we move forward together in hope for God's work in this community.

Amen.

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