

## **“Faith, Trust, and Life After Death”**

Sermon of March 1st, 2009 by The Rev. Joe Summers

*Gracious God, let your anointing spirit be among us that the heavens might open, and walking the path of trust, we might know eternal life. Amen.*

Buenas Dias! I bring greetings from the sisters and brothers at La Iglesia Remanente and their pastor Bayardo Lopez and his wife Francis. They send their love and their thanks to all of you and asked me to let you know that they keep us in their prayers. Given the enormous challenges they face every day, this means a lot.

Today, the first Sunday of Lent, I want to talk about faith and trust and life after death. It's something I've been thinking about more and more as I get older, and what I encountered in Nicaragua this past week has made me think about it even more.

Bob Dylan once said that those not busy being born are busy dying. That can sound like some kind of call to stay young and open minded, but today I'm feeling it as a pretty literal truth.

When I first went to Nicaragua around Christmas of 1989, it was at the tail end of the revolution. To bring an end to the US embargo and the US funded contra war, the Nicaraguans were about to vote the Sandinistas out of power. The Sandinistas were the movement that overthrew the brutal dictator Somoza and tried to create a new day for the poor of the land. For three years they succeeded until the U.S. began to fund a mercenary army that eventually brought the country to its knees. However, when I was there back then, despite the enormous poverty, despite the fact that people were only eating rice and beans and almost nothing else, despite the fact that the trade embargo meant they could not afford to buy anything else so it seemed like half the country was wearing donated old American t-shirts with strange slogans on them -- the light still shown in their eyes. The light of pride at what they had been able to accomplish: bring an end to a reign of humiliation and terror, bringing literacy and health care throughout the country, helping to end severe malnutrition, helping to redistribute the land so poor people could begin to enjoy the fruits of their labor, beginning to bring an end to domestic violence. Seeing poor people, peasants, walking around with this kind of pride and joy is something I will never forget.

Twenty years later most people are eating much better. With their rice and beans they have meat and vegetables, juice and milk. Most people dress better and there are all kinds of goods in the market place. Now little three-wheel taxis are everywhere. Houses are painted and you see new public buildings going up. But most of the time you don't see the same light shining in people's eyes--except maybe when they see a child, and then Nicaraguans just seem to melt with joy over their beautiful children. The Nicaraguan people are collectively living life after the death of their dream: the dream of the beatitudes, the dream of a land where the hungry would be fed, the homeless sheltered, the dream of a land where the poor would own their land and where truth and justice and peace and love would prevail. And on this trip I found myself so inspired by how they keep on keeping on after this great loss. How much they seem to get up each day and renew their faith to discover what might be possible in this new time.

I went to an evangelism crusade in the regional Capital of Masaya to see what it was like. 10,000 people filled the baseball stadium to hear a combination of the Koran preachers, who paid for the event, and wonderful Nicaraguan music. It was striking to me how the same words, which in our context often seem old and tired and judgmental --in that context, seem to have a very different meaning. It was like I could feel the people around me each fighting a spiritual battle to renew their faith, so that they could overcome the enormous obstacles that they face each day, and feel real happiness.\*

Poor Nicaraguans experience so much loss, so much disappointment. Someone will save up a small fortune to buy a used bus to give themselves a business, then the bus will break and they won't be able to afford to replace the part. They will make beautiful goods which tourists would love, but few tourists come to buy them or they are too big for the tourist to bring home with them. They invest all in raising their children and seeing that they work hard to get a good education and go to college, only to see that their children can't get jobs when they get out. And when I say they invest all, I mean it almost literally. They spend all their money on education, such that they may not even pave the floors of their houses, or have toilets, or have any belongings, because they believe, if they spend their money on getting their kids educated, their kids will have a chance for a different life, so it must be so hard when this doesn't happen. People In Nicaragua fall in love and then often wait years to get married because they want to have some kind of way to support a family, only to see the daily poverty crush the spirit of their partners and drive them apart from each other.

But the difference I felt in Nicaragua compared to here is that people there seem to be so much more aware of the need to fight a spiritual battle, if you are going to keep the light shining within you, and this struggle to have faith seems a much more open issue than it is here.

Trust is what keeps our hearts open to life, to love, in all its abundance and all its heartbreak. When terrible things happen to us, it is only natural that we would lose trust. This is where faith becomes so important, because faith can keep the door to our hearts open until we are healed enough to be able to begin to trust again. But without faith, our hearts often just closed up and stay closed. On the surface we may appear to be doing fine, but the light is not there, the joy is not there, the sense of living life fully is not there.

I have seen so many terrible things happen to members of this community: the absolute disaster of giving your heart to someone, only to have it broken, the madness of having depression or mental illness disconnect your heart, your mind, your feelings or your body, the ravage of addiction and violence, debilitating illnesses or physical pain, the absolute powerlessness you feel when you fear you can't sustain or take care of your children. And yet, I don't feel that we've yet found our way to the freedom to share these burdens in an ongoing way. Yes, we may announce them when they first happen. But in this culture we seem to feel like death is something we should simply be able to get over, after a little while, such that we stop sharing our struggle with death three months, six months, or a year later. But any real death leaves a mark on us for life. And if we are going to keep it from significantly diminishing our capacity to love and to be loved, we need to keep waging that spiritual battle to keep our hearts from shutting down, to

keep the light within us shining, to keep the door of our souls open to the possibility of real happiness and real intimacy.

Jesus went into the Judean dessert, a wildly barren, cavernous landscape, to wrestle with the things within him that might tempt him to not be what he wanted to be or not do what he wanted to do. Jesus felt called to help bring the day of justice, peace and love. He understood that there could be no shortcuts. From the Mount of Temptations he could see Jericho, an oasis which represented economic power, Qumran, the community of religious isolationists, and Jerusalem, through which the Romans ruled the land through political and military power. He rejected what each of them represented: economic power over others, military and political power over others, and religious power over others. He chose instead the way of the Human One, the way of vulnerability and love, of power with not power over, but the way of life and death and life again.

Most of us may not feel particularly called to overthrow the forces of political, religious, and spiritual domination in our society the way Jesus clearly felt compelled to do. But in whatever path we are feeling called, in whatever good work we are being called to do, whether it is to be a good mother or father or partner or friend or simply a good human being, whether it is to make some little or big difference in our community or world, we need to face the fact that we are up against enormous spiritual obstacles, enormous psychological and emotional and physical realities that will keep us from being who we want to be and/or doing what we want to do, unless we are prepared to get up each day and embrace the way of faith: the way of creating a path where there is no path, the way of finding possibility where there doesn't appear to be any, the way of letting God transform us, so we ourselves might become the agents of the transformation we are looking for, the transformative element that helps to open locked doors and part mighty seas. And we can't do this alone. We can't do this if we are isolated in our struggles. We need the community of faith to help us overcome all for the sake of all.

So let us be people of sincerity and truth. Let us be people who try, as clearly as possible, to articulate what we are up against. Let us be people who realize that the experience of spiritual death is not some rare event. For most adults it seems seared into the very fabric of our existence, such that it requires an ongoing spiritual battle to keep it from defining our whole lives. Let us be people who encourage one another, hold one another, and nurture each other back to life until, if and when, the day comes when we experience trust once again and can again drink freely of the waters of life. Let us be people willing to go into the desert, so that we might be born again and again and again. For if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.

\* It is in this context that, in Nicaragua, the phrase "has found God" becomes a powerful statement about some kind of inner light that people have found, that helps them to live from a different place and can be the difference between making it and not making it.