

1st Sunday in Advent

Cycle B-2023

At the beginning of the Advent Season, I like to assure everyone that God hold us, the Church, and the universe in the palm of His hands. I believe that sometimes we need that reassurance when things get confusing, difficult, and chaotic. The notion of God holding us in the palm of His hands leads me to reflect on a picture that I have in my Adoration room at the rectory. It seeks to capture the biblical image of the potter and the clay. On the canvas, Jesus is looking with great love and warmth on the clay which is he delicately and delightfully embracing in His hands. As this action unfolds, there is a dove which hovers over the clay. The picture reveals that Jesus is the Potter and we are the clay that He loves with a personal and intimate love. As He seeks to mold and shape us, the Holy Spirit is work seeking to make us into someone even more inwardly beautiful than we already are. I hang this image in my adoration room as an expression of my faith that through prayer, Jesus is molding and shaping me. Through prayer, He is proclaiming to me, "See, I make all things new."

In our first reading from the Book of Isaiah, the prophet proclaims: “Yet, O Lord, You are our Father; we are the clay and You are the Potter; we are all the work of Your hands.” These words touch a very deep place in my soul. They open up within me, a space that allows me to more fully feel and experience the warmth and security of God’s love. It celebrates that we are always in God’s hands.

The good news is that this is true whether we allow Him to embrace us or whether we try to vigorously pry His hands off of us. To use the lingo of our first reading, even though God allows us to wander, we are still in His hands. In His providential love, He fearlessly and relentlessly seeks to mold and shape us, even when we are in a personal place of indifference, hard heartedness, open rebellion, or a total lack of belief.

The only time God’s hands are removed from us, is if we have persisted in being separated from Him all the way through death. We are only permanently forsaken because we have told God through the state of our soul at death, “God, I forever forsake You. I never want You in my life again.” We do not have to actually utter those words. We utter them through how we have chosen to

live contrary to Him and His revealed will, in life, all the way through death.

The sense of being permanently forsaken is truly an endless nightmare that is experienced as an everlasting hell. Try to imagine this. No joy. No love. No affirmation. No comfort and consolation. No peace. No communion with God and other people. No relief. Never! Ever! Again! Our state of consciousness forever spirals downward. We crumble in on ourselves in a never-ending vortex of sorrow, regret, anger, anguish, and hopelessness. We become suffocated by and calcified in a state of self-absorption that only magnifies and intensifies our inner state of misery. I get overwhelmed just trying to identify with this horrific reality. It takes my breath away. I get this suffocating and imploding feeling inside. This hellish experience is just the natural state of the soul forever cut off from God by our own free will choice.

Thanks be to God, this does not have to be our eternal destiny. Throughout the entirety of our lives, God is the Potter who is seeking to mold us and shape us so that we are at a good interior place in life and an even better interior place in death. As our Heavenly Father, God is quite personal, intelligent, and creative, in how He seeks

to mold and shape us. His approach is tailor made to us individually, just like a good parent loves all their children equally but approaches them differently. He caters His approach to how we are, and our state of consciousness at any given moment.

Our Heavenly Father has some preferred methods of molding and shaping us. His number one preferred method to mold and shape us is through the experience of LOVE that comes to us in a variety of ways: God, family, friends, and beloved pets. We can also be molded and shaped by the love of treasured acquaintances and trusted mentors. Even though God's love is most important, these other forms of love also help us to form a strong sense of self, that is necessary in receiving and giving love. Both giving and receiving love is important. Not just giving. Not just receiving. It is both/and. Our experience of love also helps cultivate a spirit of thanksgiving and a sense of mission, which sets our souls on fire and brings passion into our lives.

Our Heavenly Father also prefers to mold and shape us through our experience of SUFFERING. In doing so, He takes something seemingly meaningless and absurd and makes it into something that can be an abundant source of blessing for ourselves and other people. Even though

God is not the Source or Author of suffering, He can use it to heal and change us in the most amazing ways. Our suffering helps us to see that we really need God and other people. It can also bring about a spirit of empathy and compassion that becomes a catalyst for the loving care and service of others. Suffering has the power to shake and rattle the foundations of lives and our sense of personal identity. In doing so, it possesses great potential in bringing about personal and spiritual maturity.

Love and suffering are the two most powerful forces in the universe. Love reigns supreme but sometimes we only make significant and permanent breakthroughs through suffering and sacrifice. Love has the power to melt our hearts and open them up to the Spirit of God like a most beautiful aroma filled rose. In the process, our capacity for love can continue to reach new heights and new depths. Unfortunately, and sometimes tragically, we will not even consider changing the broken status quo of our lives, unless suffering forces us down on bended knee. As the Bible astutely proclaims, we can be a “stiff necked people.” As the story of the Prodigal Son reveals, sometimes it is only through suffering that we finally come to our senses.

In addition to love and suffering, our Heavenly Father prefers to mold and shape us through our LIFE EXPERIENCES. As we engage in our life, God can increase and grow our wisdom, giftedness, confidence, and competency. As we experience success and failure, as well as fulfilled and unfulfilled goals and expectations, God can increase and grow our vision, inner drive, perseverance, and our mercy towards others and ourselves. As we consciously and conscientiously place ourselves in God's hands, we allow Him to grow our goodness, gradually deliver us from the bondage of our sin and selfishness, and smooth out our rough and jagged personal and spiritual edges.

In fact, God loves us so much, He is even willing to use our SINFULNESS as a preferred method to mold and shape us. He is willing to use our sinfulness to our advantage. As we fully indulge our sinfulness, God allows us to discover that our sinful desires do not satisfy the deepest desires of our hearts. This indulgence ultimately leads us to drink deeply of restlessness, emptiness, and a lack of fulfillment. It brings us headaches and heartaches.

As we consent to God molding and shaping us, it is not a straight line of progression, because we have a strong

tendency to revoke our consent. Therefore, there will be times where we experience three steps forward and two steps back. At other times, it will be two steps forward and three steps back. The key is that on a moment by moment, or day by day basis, we seek to renew our consent. As our consent becomes more habitual, we remain a work in progress, but we gradually become a masterpiece in the making. We become a masterpiece in the making because the end game of our Heavenly Father is to mold and shape us into a living image of His Son. Our Heavenly Father wants to see more of His Son in us. He wants us to show more of His Son to other people, in and through us.

As we enter into and embrace the Advent Season, may have a renewed awareness that God is the Potter, and we are the clay. May we come to a renewed trust and surrender that He is molding and shaping us into something beautiful, that will stand the test of time. Even more than that, He is molding and shaping us into something that will stand the test of eternity. As God proclaims to us: “I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have called you and you are mine.”