

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

July 16, 2006 – Pentecost 6b

Pr. Robert M. Goldstein

“Picking Up the Pieces”

Text: Mark 6:14-29

I am struck by the ending words of this morning’s Gospel: “When his disciples heard about John’s fate, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.”

This has reference to the fact that John the Baptist had been beheaded by the arrogant and the powerful in that preservation of privilege and wealth.

John the Baptist had been infected by that “God thing” that Israel first caught in Egypt in the distant echoes of its early past. That “God thing” had given this eccentric prophet the courage to take on the mighty in the name of justice and morality. But the mighty did not fall this time, only John’s head.

So being a prophet is not ticket to success. You can lose your head. Your glory, if any, is in the remembrance of the little people of God who picked up the pieces and humbly gave John a decent burial, preserving the story of his life and death as part of God’s work. Picking up the pieces.

In the first reading, that “God thing” had infected Amos in very unstable times for the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Amos too had no share of elite and powerful, but God took hold of this little guy who too took on the high and mighty with that divine standard of justice and mercy for the poor and the oppressed. Here was a shepherd and orchard laborer finding voice in the “God thing”, warning the two kingdoms of their impending war and disaster from the powerful nations of the north.

Amos’ words fell flat in the courts of the powerful. But Amos’ words were to fall tragically true and it was left to more of God’s prophets, Isaiah and Esther, and many other ordinary people, to pick up the pieces of two destroyed kingdoms. They picked up the pieces and moved to Babylon where Judaism would eventually flower in exciting new ways and enrich the traditions and life of Israel and its “God thing” to this day. Picking up the pieces.

I try to watch the evening world news. It was on Thursday evening that I remember saying to myself, “The news is really becoming bad.” It has not let up. Violence, war, instability are everywhere. Who’s going to have to pick up the pieces?

One can’t blame Bush for everything, but you’ll notice that with Iran and North Korea, in contrast to their arrogant swagger over going to war with Iraq, they are turning to the United Nations --turning to a relatively young world body they have weakened by their high and mighty contempt for it and, with their doctrine of preemptive strike, greatly increased the

insecurities and anxieties of the less powerful nations. Who is going to pick up the pieces? Ordinary folk who weep for their dead and maimed. Picking up the pieces.

Longing for Clinton and Gore after this orgy of flying up the flag to cover the abuse of power, the torrents of greed, the wholesale arrogance of this administration? Compare how Bosnia was handled. Who's going to pick up the pieces?

Yesterday was a day of great contrasts for our organist, David Schofield, and me. In the morning we held a memorial service for a gifted young man who took his life. There was a pall of grief over me all week deeper and gloomier than the gloomiest fogs of San Francisco. Even after 31 years on the job, this sort of thing doesn't get any easier.

His mother and closest friends were devastated, of course, as they tried to pick up the pieces. And the service was designed to nurture some sense of hope. The energy needed just to coax hope out was intense. But such energy rarely showed in the extracted tears and the moments of laughter over Eric's quirky ways. Picking up the pieces.

My words were very carefully chosen and if they took flight with hope, I was never sure, except that one of the most conflicted survivors, who seemed to take it out on me as the rep of the "God thing" embraced me at the end and kissed me on the neck and thanked me. Picking up the pieces.

In the afternoon we had a wedding. And by contrast hope was everywhere in the eyes of two people truly in love and in the demeanor of the very youthful wedding party. As I was leading them through their vows, in a sanctuary flooded with hope and joy, I thought of the world news and its abundant and full servings of hopelessness and despair, and thought, here is an age old source of hope that kept the little ordinary people going who buried John the Baptist, who had to pick up the pieces after the rampages of the arrogant and the powerful. Hope was gathering up the pieces.

But not so fast! There had been a price paid for that joyous wedding. Some pieces had to be picked up from the rehearsal.

I've met some controlling parents in my years of wedding rehearsals. We lost 20 minutes at the very beginning as the bride's mother insisted that the bride and bridesmaids had to come down the aisle on the left side of the grooms. This was how it had to be done. Things were really beginning to fall into pieces.

After we finally got through to her that her daughter and fiancée wanted the bridesmaids to come down alone, she insisted that her husband bring the bride down on his right arm, not his left. Right arm, left arm, I really didn't care, but it would have looked odd when they reached the altar. The tension was palpable. The wedding couple decided to have both parents escort the bride down.

Throughout the rehearsal she would interrupt and expect things to be rearranged. And finally, finally, near the very end, she wanted to know where it was said, "Who gives this woman to be married." I must have looked crazed, but I started out calmly saying that this

church would never use that language because it treats women as pieces of male property. She was not impressed. So I told her to shut up, that bride and groom decide what goes. She was shocked into silence. But there was going to be pieces that had to be picked up from this.

I later apologized to the bride and even to the mother. And all was really forgotten at the truly lovely and joyous wedding. At the wedding reception, however, as fate would have it, I was placed right next to the mother of the bride. I accepted the chastisement of a wrathful God. But during the course of the evening she began to speak to me and told me that she and her husband to her right were really divorced -- that he walked out on her with two kids and one on the way.

At first I thought, well, no wonder. But then I began to pick up the pieces, as we all must do at times, of a woman whose difficult personality was made all the more difficult by the struggle of raising alone three fine children. A human scale was cast on the scene. You could see that the three children were very close and loved each other and had adapted to their parents.

The three kids had taken turns at all three of their weddings to sing at the wedding of their siblings. The kids had picked up the pieces of their family and brought forth not despair but, at last, a lot of hope. They had really picked up the pieces, as God's children have done in Amos, with John the Baptist and the countless disasters that befall this human experiment called life together. We can pick up the pieces.

The reading from Ephesians this morning speaks of Christ gathering up all things to him. So, you see, we may pick up the pieces, but Christ gathers all the pieces together and somehow makes them a new whole, something more than pieces, a healing, a redemption of the broken pieces of human life together.

Amen

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