

Celebrating the Feast of Elizabeth Seton – January, 2009

Reflection: God's Hollow Reed

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The Hollow Reed, written about in Psalm 119, was given as the focus for our reflection this afternoon. As I sat with that image my mind was having a wonderful time coming up with all sorts of things and situations that hollow reed signifies and might be familiar to you. The most obvious, of course is its use as a musical instrument used by ancient cultures centuries and centuries ago. Simple, tribal people learned to make beautiful sounds by blowing through the reed. Even to this day we have complex music played with hollow wooden instruments fashioned after the early use of the reed. If you are a movie buff, I'm sure you have seen at least one movie, where the good guys or bad guys hide under deep waters hoping to escape whoever is chasing them and using a hollow reed to breathe and stay hidden for a long time.

But I stopped my wandering, playful mind and went to a quiet place in my heart and asked God, "What is it that you wish me to say to the sisters, associates, family and friends gathered here today" And God told me to tell you this:

"There is no such thing as a hollow reed
The reed is not empty....
The reed is filled with the presence of God.....
The reed is filled with the breath of God
The reed contains the invisible mystery of God's love
All creation is sustained by God's creative energy
God's presence permeates everyone and everything."

When you read the words of Elizabeth Seton, not only the ones in today's prayer program, but in many, many of her writings, you get the distinct feeling that Elizabeth experienced in a very real and intimate way God's presence in her life. She knew the reed was not hollow. Her writings reveal a holy woman who achieved union with her God while she was still on this earth going about her ministry in everyday ordinary life. In her own words she wrote

"This union of my soul with God is my wealth in poverty and joy in deepest afflictions."

"There can be no disappointment where the soul's only desire and expectation is to meet His adored will and fulfill it."

"I can jump over all the troubles of this life with more gaiety and real lightness of heart than ever. Sometimes I can hardly contain my interior cheerfulness."

It would be fun to stop here and ask the question, "When was the last time I was jumping over my troubles with gaiety?" Or, "When was the last time I could not contain my interior cheerfulness?"

To understand and write about: "wealth in poverty", "joy in afflictions", "no disappointment; only God's will", "gaiety when troubles arise", "a light and cheerful heart": ... These words, my friends, come from a woman whose heart was on fire with the love of God, and whose soul was intimately aware of God's presence in the totality of her being. There was a flow of love between Elizabeth and her God. She indeed experienced that the reed was not hollow. She had a deep knowing that God's presence permeated every aspect of creation and was marvelously and mysteriously present in every moment of every day.

Her life is such a testimony of loving service. She was a wife and mother experiencing hardship and death of her husband and two of her children at a young age. And yet, her life is also marked by great joy and cheerful acceptance, which could only have come because of her deep and intimate relationship with God; her sense of Oneness with the Beloved. As I reflect on the life of Elizabeth Ann Seton, it is clear to me how often she wrote about union with God and talked about union with God. Her life and ministry give evidence of a soul in union with God. So, I have come to believe, in my own heart, that our Congregation; the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Ohio, was founded by a true modern -day -mystic. We were founded by a holy woman who was in union with God to the extent possible in this life. This is our legacy. We were founded by Elizabeth Ann Seton – a mystic!

The second thing God told me to tell you, (beyond “the reed is not hollow” but pregnant with His presence), is stories. He told me to tell you some stories from the early days of our Congregation’s beginnings, so that we will remember where we came from and why. God told me to tell you, “Stories are told to awaken the heart to the truth.” Stories are not factual accounts to be analyzed. We can read history for that. Stories are told to help us remember and re-awaken the spirit and truth buried deep in our hearts. So, let us recall our early days, and tell a few stories that have been passed down to us. Remember, I am not telling these from a factual point of view. So you may remember some things differently. I did not look anything up. I’m telling the stories to wake up our hearts. One thing is clear to me; our early ministries were marked by radical, non-judgmental, compassionate service to others. Our Sisters saw the need and responded.

Stories

Cincinnati was a river-boat-town. The boats and the men came; the boats and the men left. And as our Sisters went about their care for the orphans and sick, they noticed the presence of young un-wed pregnant women on the streets of Cincinnati. They took them in and cared for them. The Bishop and other righteous people told our sisters not to do that, ... that they were condoning and promoting promiscuity and immorality. Our sisters did not judge, and they did not stop caring for the women and their babies. They did not care what people said to them or about them.

When the Civil War broke out our sisters went to the battle fields, warehouses, and flat-boats to care for the sick, wounded and dying soldiers. Nowhere is it recorded that they held a meeting to discuss what effect this ministry might have on the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Our sisters were strong in God’s presence, relied on His grace and providence to guide them. I feel fairly certain that they had no strategic plan. They had little or no money, so no budget was required. I can’t imagine many committee meetings or conference calls. Our legacy is that our sisters addressed the issues and the needs as they presented themselves in the present moment.

So when the population of our young country started to move West, so did our sisters; ... Santa Fe, Trinidad, Albuquerque, Pueblo, Colorado Springs and later, Canon City and Denver. We went with nothing but our faith in God and the desire to serve. WE continued our care for orphans and our focus on education. But the deplorable health conditions, the serious injuries due to the building of the railroads and unsafe conditions in the mines provided an additional challenge to our sisters. They started clinics in the mining shacks. We cared for miners and railroad workers, and yes, even outlaws as we recall the story of Sister Blandina and Billy the Kid; ... a strong fearless woman negotiating and bargaining with men who robbed banks and stage coaches, and who killed for what they wanted.

Truly, our legacy as Sisters of Charity, revealed in these few stories, is a legacy of radical , non-judgmental compassionate care for others no matter who they were or where we found them. It strikes me, as we re-tell these stories, as we wake up our hearts to the truth of our roots, we find very little structure, not many rules. There was a freedom to follow the spirit, and a flexibility and openness to make decisions based on needs. I suggest that there were two very clear, strong constants that the sisters remained faithful to; they prayed and begged. They prayed to do God’s will, for guidance, wisdom, protection, to always be open to the Spirit. They begged for food and money outside saloons and mining camps while also turning to the wealthy and people of status for assistance.

Our early sisters were smart women, fearless women, women who faced hard times. I have come to realize that their minds were at the service of their hearts and not the other way around. It was a decision of the heart that prompted a small group of sisters to leave the security of Baltimore, and travel by boat to a new, strange city called Cincinnati. It was compassionate hearts that reached out to the un-wed pregnant women abandoned on the streets. A decision of the mind would have feared the Bishop or criticism of the people, afraid of what people would say or think about them. Courageous hearts were called to care for the Civil War soldiers. And it was from a place of heart that our sisters joined the first pioneers and ventured into the “Wild West” to serve and be with the people.

In a few moments we will renew our commitments as Sisters of Charity and as SC Associates. Let us take a few minutes in silence to reflect on the legacy given to us by Elizabeth Ann Seton and the lives and ministries of our founding Sisters. I have shared my piece of truth with you and that is all it is; my piece of truth. You may not agree with it, but I spoke to you from my heart, and I spoke to you about what God asked me to tell you:

The reed is not hollow. It is filled with the loving presence of God.
Elizabeth knew this. She was connected with the powerful energy
of God’s unconditional and unlimited love in a very special way.

WE tell our stories to awaken our hearts to the truth, to set them free,
free for God, free for radical, compassionate, non-judgmental service to all others.

It is now time for you to uncover your piece of truth. What is your heart telling you, inviting you to
so that we are once again empty and free for God to show us how to “dare to risk a caring response”?