

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A – Aug. 30, 2015

Suzanne Dunn, RCWP

Deut. 4:1-2, 6-8; James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27; Mk. 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

I brought the readings for today with me on retreat and when I read the opening commentary from *Celebrations*, I had a good laugh. It reads as follows: “Today’s three readings bring up one of the most vexing issues of biblical faith. Just what religious rules and regulations does God demand we keep, and which ones can we discard? Is it possible that some of our most fervently kept laws don’t come from God?” And I thought to myself: You mean like the one in canon law that says only men can be ordained?

Well I am about to break another law—this one is a liturgical law that says a homelist should preach on the scripture readings that are read at Liturgy. I will not be doing that this evening. Instead I am going to be obeying another little-known pastoral law that says that once a year a pastor should address illness and death and the preparation for each of these events in our lives with her/his community.

I am not sure how each of you are feeling this evening. I only know I left here last Sunday heading for Redwoods Monastery with a very heavy heart. As I watched health crises after health crises unfolding in our beloved community, I left feeling bereaved and somewhat overwhelmed by the unfolding events. Some illnesses seemed to come on so suddenly, while others have been more chronic.

I wondered how each of you was feeling and how you are dealing with your own inter-

nal responses to what has been happening to us since the loss of Genie’s son, followed by Easter Sunday when our beloved Gary suffered a stroke. We have witnessed Harriet and Diane dealing with heart problems and Mary Lou having back surgery. We know that Geri, Max’s beloved wife, is suffering her own battle with dementia and we have missed Joanna in her health problems and now Carol, as she deals with her cancer. And we know that most of us are involved in various levels of memory loss more or less appropriate to our aging process.

We haven’t spoken about it as a community and I would like to offer you the opportunity to share your feelings about our situation this evening. Take a moment and go inside and ask yourself: What am I feeling in response to the various health breakdowns in our community? When you are ready, share a word or phrase that describes your thoughts or feelings.

* * *

I am not surprised by your responses and I am glad we are talking about it as a community. We need to be here to hear and support one another as we go through this evolutionary stage in our community’s growth.

Illness and death are a part of our life cycle. Yet it isn’t anything that we freely talk about. During retreat last week I read the book *Being Mortal* by Atul Gawande. It is a

well-written book with so much information about end-of-life issues. Let me share a couple of reviews with you:

- “A deeply affecting, urgently important book—one not just about dying and the limits of medicine but about living to the last with autonomy, dignity, and joy.” – Katherine Boo
- “Beautifully written, this book has provided us with a moving and clear-eyed look at aging and death in our society, and at the harms we do in turning it into a medical problem, rather than a human one.” –*The New York Review of Books*.

I would like to propose that our community read this book. During Advent, we could hold one or two discussions on this book. Then I would like to follow this up by sponsoring a workshop on “The Five Wishes.” The information received from this workshop will help each of us put our affairs in order, so to speak. It will clarify for us what we want in terms of our preparations for our own dying. It will help us clarify what truly matters to us in our final ending. What a blessing this will be not only for ourselves, but for our loved ones.

Many churches have sponsored “The Five Wishes” workshop for their parishioners and I feel it is appropriate timing for us to do likewise. Once we have “our affairs” in order, so to speak, we can continue to look at the spirituality of dying well. Let us do this together as a community of faith.

Joan Halifax has written a book called *Being with Dying – Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness in the Presence of Death*. On the first page, she writes: “In many spiritual teachings, the great divide between life and death collapses into an integrated energy that cannot be fragmented. In this view, to deny death is to deny life. Old age, sickness, and death do not have to be equated with suffering: we can live and practice in such a way that dying is a natural rite of passage, a completion of our life, and even the ultimate in liberation.”

I think we have a wonderful example of facing our potentially final illness in Jimmy Carter. I will be sending you an article I was sent about the equanimity and deep faith with which Jimmy Carter shared with the world his diagnosis of cancer. His warmth and his smile in addressing the nation gives evidence to his deep faith. I think Carol’s letter to our community with her news of her cancer equally expressed a deep faith. I spent two hours with her yesterday and left feeling blessed. Amid the nurses coming in to do blood work and to talk about medications, etc., we did manage to find time to share at a very deep level the experience of letting go on so many levels. The one phrase she said that stuck in my mind is: “This has been a time of cascading blessings.”

This is my wish for each one of us. May we walk into the unknown future with deep peace knowing we are not alone. May we learn to find the cascading blessings. May we, as a community, create together a meaningful ritual for a fully conscious dying process.