

### **First Reading**

*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master,  
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood, as to understand;  
to be loved, as to love.*

--from the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

### **Second Reading**

We believe in the ancient message that adopting an attitude of faith and hope toward this life and all that it brings will profoundly alter our lives and our universe.

--John McQuiston, *The Benedictine Way of Living*

Hymn #144, "Alleluia! Sing to Jesus!"

Good morning.

*In a remote mountain village somewhere in the Far East, people of all races, ages, abilities, and faiths came to see the Holy Man who lived at the top of the mountain. The line snaked all the way down the mountain to the village below, and people would wait for months—the whole of the warm season—to make it to the top. If they didn't make it to the front of the line before the snows came, some would make the entire pilgrimage again the following year. Others returned year after year, marking important anniversaries or renewing their personal faith.*

*When new pilgrims arrived at the house on the top of the mountain, an elderly servant answered the door. "Can I help you?" he asked.*

*"We have come to see the Holy Man," the eager pilgrims responded, incredulous to have finally made it so far.*

*"Of course, right this way," the servant replied, and turned to go, simple cloth robe swishing as he clipped through the winding hallways. "Ya, ya, right this way," he repeated, the pilgrims struggling to keep up with him, ever more eager to lay eyes on the man they had come so far to see. At last, the servant came to a door. "Here we are," he smiled, and opened the door to reveal nothing more than the open air, and the backside of the mountain up which the visitors had trudged for so many months.*

*"But ... but ..." the pilgrims sputtered breathlessly. "We came all this way to see the Holy Man!"*

*"And you have seen him," the servant replied, with a radiant smile that left no doubt. "If you make an effort to see everyone you meet as holy," he counseled, "you will find what*

*you seek. Goodbye!” And the door would shut behind them, leaving the pilgrims to trek, dumbfounded, down the mountain alone. –adapted from *The Holy Man*, by Susan Trott*

I arrived in New York to meet my reluctant future in-laws one week before our wedding day. And no sooner was I introduced than we were being whisked off to a meeting with Barnabas Thirumeni, Mar Gregorious Metropolitan, Regional Bishop of New York, arranged by and insisted upon by my father-in-law. “Don’t worry,” my mother-in-law assured me. “He is a very holy man. Everyone says so.” She tried to reassure me by saying that my husband’s brother and his wife had also met with the same bishop before their wedding a few months earlier, and they had found the experience meaningful. At that moment, they too were challenging our decision to marry (in a heated phone conversation the previous month, my future sister-in-law had firmly declared, “Don’t you understand? You will *never* be accepted!”). I felt I had so little in common with them that I allowed this fairly *un-Christian* thought to pass through my mind: “Well, if she liked it, then I probably won’t.” In fact, I wasn’t at all sure what this faith had to offer me. From what I could tell, the main precepts seemed to be to obey your parents, go to church every Sunday, and marry Indian—all of which we were failing miserably at that summer. But the appointment was already fixed, and we set off to a little house in Queens.

Although my dress did graze my knee, I could see that my mother-in-law clearly found it too short (in my mind’s eye now, I note that it did also boast a flimsy, gauzy polyester material and very thin spaghetti straps). I was annoyed at having to go at all. My fiancé, Varghese, was anxious to keep the tenuous peace in his house that had descended since I had arrived and his father had called him “The Prodigal Son.”

The bishop’s house felt oddly familiar to me, recalling from my childhood visits to great-aunts and distant cousins in rural Iowa. The tiny living and dining rooms opened into each other, carpeted with a sort of orangey-tan shag; some of the chairs were covered in plastic, and we waited for the bishop on a yellowed couch with rough, scratchy upholstery. When he emerged, we gathered around a dining room table strewn with books, papers, and letters. A woman brought a plate of cookies from the kitchen.

My mother-in-law continued to fret about the skimpiness of my dress, but as soon as he came in I could see that it wasn’t going to matter one bit. The bishop was small, perhaps 4’10” at the age of 80, and his narrow grey beard reached almost to his chest. In photos around the room of various Orthodox ceremonies, the assisting officiants dwarfed him. But his presence was not small. He made eye contact and held it, and after that we were just

people, talking to one another. Suddenly, what we looked like or smelled like or sounded like was of no consequence. He wasn't there to judge me; my clothes made no difference at all. I could have been dressed in a potato sack—even a skimpy potato sack—and he would never have noticed.

He spoke of love and kindness, and though neither my husband nor I can remember whether the ancient, tiny man from southern India actually used the words “snowball effect,” that was his theme: the momentum that builds from just one small act of goodness. He told story after story of couples whose love for one another grew because they made it the work of their marriage to be kind to and help one another. The kinder they were to each other, the more inspired they were to repay these kindnesses, small and large, for all of their days. His words made such an impression that I had to admit, at the end of the evening, that I did indeed have something in common with my in-laws. For the first time in months, I relaxed about our wedding, safe with the sense that everything was going to turn out all right.

A month later, we arrived on the campus that was to be our new home in our roles as teachers, coaches, and dorm parents at a small boarding school in Western North Carolina. It didn't take us long to realize that this was a place where the bishop's message was visible nearly every day. We saw it in the way people flocked to help us move in when we arrived -- as we learned they had done so for others beforehand. We saw it in the quickness with which our colleagues volunteered to cover classes or duties whenever someone was in need. We liked this new place, though even by mid-February or so, it still didn't really feel like home.

But then, I had a medical emergency. At the time, in addition to our regular load of classes and duties, Varghese was also scheduled to take the basketball team to a tournament in Rabun Gap, Georgia. At 7:15 in the morning, he e-mailed a tentative request for help. In moments, literally, the school mobilized to care for us, and we became passive recipients of a generosity that swirled around us. By 7:30 in the morning, within fifteen minutes of that early morning e-mail, three people—not one, not two, but THREE—had offered to help with the basketball tournament. Substitutes were arranged for our classes. Duties were covered. So many people, willing to reschedule plans with their classes, wives, and families in their own crazy-busy lives so Varghese could be with me while I went into surgery. Homecooked veggies and delicious gourmet stews appeared outside our door, along with cards wishing us well.

Although I cannot overstate how moved we were during this time, it was really only the beginning. This overwhelming generosity of spirit was the first small snowball that began to roll. The second, perhaps greater, miracle was yet to come. We speak often about that

meeting with the bishop, the anomaly of it, wondering at how separate that moment seemed from the rest of our lives, and yet how prophetic. Like the Grinch, whose heart grew three sizes after hearing the Whos singing down in Whoville, I felt my heart expand in that bleak winter. We began to sense that we, too, could become more giving, more willing to help, that we could “pay forward” the debt to those who helped us, by helping others. In our dark hour, we confirmed what we had known all along: the bishop, our holy man, was right.

We still have a long way to go in our house. While we do try to live out these precepts, it’s pretty easy to be kind back to people who are kind to you, and quite another thing to try to get yourself to start this snowball effect when you feel like there’s no snow to work with. The real test is to try to be kind to—or, to borrow someone else’s idea, to see as holy—those who aren’t so kind to you. It takes practice and diligence and mindfulness and patience. It takes a whole lot of swallowing of pride. I possess these qualities in only short supply—even shorter on some days than others. But I’m inspired to keep working on it, ever since I made a pilgrimage of my own, since I met a little man with wisdom to share.