

## Reflection & Prayertime -April 27, 2020

Welcome everyone and thank you for carving out this time. We may come from various faith and religious traditions or from none at all, but the great thing is that today we come together to encourage and support and pray for one another and those we care about. If today's message doesn't scratch the particular itch that brought you here today, please come back and we'll see if it does the next time. I appreciate very much your gift of time being present here with us.

The Scripture reading for today's reflection is John 17: 20-26 where Jesus prays for all believers. It reads:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message that all of them may be one. Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me - so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and I myself may be in them.

The word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

I want us to think today about tone, specifically setting the tone. Not musical tone, although that is important. As soon as I finish here, my husband and I are heading to South Oaks Senior Housing to play guitar and sing outside their apartments just for fun. Last night we were going over songs to do and were singing "All I have to do is Dream" by the Everly brothers and our daughter Sarah picked up the mic and started beatboxing to it and you would think it'd be a terrible mix, but it actually was great and put a little upbeat step and energy in the song that made it better and I hope we can talk her into going with us and doing it as it really changed the tone. If you know the theme song to the TV show series "Friends" and how

bouncy it is and if you go on youtube and find the guy playing it on piano in a minor key and singing it very dramatically, you'll appreciate how much power there is in setting the tone.

But today I'm focusing on setting the tone in a situation, something we may not often think about in the context of faith. But it behooves us to take time to meditate on the issue of tone, because in life, we too frequently underestimate its importance. You may have heard it said, that how you say something is as important as or more than what you actually say. That idea calls to mind the words of the great poet Maya Angelou who wrote, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." It is also consistent with twentieth century American author Dorothy Parker's command, "Don't look at me with that tone of voice."

When my daughter hit about middle school age, maybe a little before, a new saying made its appearance in our home that came out of my mouth more than a few times; it was "You can tuck that sass in your pocket." As a young adult she once gave me a Christmas present of little refrigerator magnets with all my "sayings" and here's the sass tucking in the pocket magnet. In essence, I was inviting her to examine her tone and please substitute another one. How the tone is set and communicated in almost any situation will inevitably impact the situation's trajectory. This is why I sang in my very loudest voice "Oh What a Beautiful Morning" from the musical Oklahoma every morning to wake up said daughter every school day as I opened the blinds. It's really no wonder some sass erupted from that, but honestly I was trying to set a good tone for the day. Truly I took no pleasure in her grumpy greetings of the day, but neither was I going to let it set the tone for my day.

In his article, "How to Set the Tone for the Day" Pastor Mark Altrogge raises the question: what is the first thing you think about when you wake up? I'll admit to not always having the most positive thoughts other than really appreciating the anticipation of coffee to come, but he asserts that the beginning of the day is the best time to set the tone. The morning is a prime time to thank God for sleep, for the day to come, and for the host of blessings in our lives. It is a time we can set a tone of thanks that can impact the whole day. The morning is where we decide grumpy or grateful. But let me add, especially if you are not particularly a morning person, we have all day long to set the reset button and reset the tone. So no worries

if you missed it this morning or do most mornings; the opportunity for reset abides.

In the Scripture passage which Biblical scholars call the farewell discourse, Jesus' life is about to be sacrificed, setting the tone of eternal love. In the previous chapter, he's preparing his disciples to set the tone in reminding them that the Holy Spirit will be present as a guide and in today's text Jesus prays "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them. The unity and love that Jesus prays for is the bond that exists between him and his Father God that can be extended to others. The tone for our faith is described as one living out of the sacrificial love of a parent.

Back in 2017 my son Jordan took a huge step into the unknown and applied for the Peace Corps. He knew he was going to Albania but no idea where specifically he would be assigned. He wrote in his blog: "For the first 6 weeks of Pre-Service Training, they don't tell you where you'll be going to live. Given that you'll be staying there for 2 years, there's understandably some tension on the part of the incoming volunteers. There's a pretty wide spectrum of places you could end up, from large cities to tiny villages on mountaintops that I don't know the name of because they're so remote. I don't think any of us were entitled about it, everyone was willing to go wherever they were sent and do a good job there, but there were definitely some things most people were hoping for. A town that wasn't a tiny village. To be with another American instead of being completely alone. Somewhere in the sunny south, as opposed to the frigid mountainous north, where the dialect is so thick you basically have to start learning the language from scratch and where the blood feuds are most notorious.

I'll admit I hoped all those things but was bracing myself for the worst, to be the only American on a mountaintop somewhere without other people, teaching English to three goats. I could see it all in my head;

*Me (shouting): No, no, no! All wrong! Try again! Repeat after me! !! AM! A! GOAT!*

*Goat: MAAAAAAHHHH*

*Me: You're making no progress and the finals are in two weeks!*

I had braced myself for the worst. The day when they were to unveil the sites we would be at was one of the longest days of my life. They scheduled the reveal for the end of the day. Not a single person focused on any of the presentations or lessons that day. There was an anxious air that hovered over the room. During the lunch break that's all anyone talked about. Some people were on the verge of tears. Myself, I was weirdly numb. In my mind I had already accepted and come to peace with the worst case scenario, and all that remained was a mild curiosity. I remember having that weird feeling that I sometimes have in the movie theater, right before a movie I've been looking forward to for months or years is about to start. That feeling of "I've been looking forward to this for so long, I've been curious for so long, and in a few short moments it'll just be a thing I know. A memory." I tried to savor the feeling.

For the ceremony we all sat in chairs facing the staff, who had a series of manilla envelopes. One by one they called our names and handed us our envelope. After you had your envelope you were free to stay or leave as you pleased. Some people left to go read their letter in silence, others opened it on the spot. When I got my envelope, I returned to my seat and put it on my lap. For what felt like a long time I just sat there, staring at the envelope. Finally I opened it and pulled out the piece of paper inside. It was a letter. I didn't read it so much as skimmed down to the part that had my site name in big letters; **Lushnjë**.

I whipped out my phone and looked on google maps. It was in the western part of Albania, close to the sea, and slightly more in the southern half. Most tellingly, it was close to Elbasan, the city where we had our meetings. It wasn't some remote place! it was basically where I was now, but closer to the sea. Wikipedia told me it had around 30,000 residents. It wasn't some

tiny village. I would be there with another American I quickly learned, a girl whom I was friends with.

My initial numbness from fear transformed into numbness from... joy? I got everything I wanted. Everything. I was going to a big (well by Albanian standards) city, an hour from Elbasan, an hour and a half from Tirana. They spoke the same dialect I had been learning. I was going to be with a friend. It was warm and sunny. I got literally everything I wanted. It might not have been the absolute best, some people were in giant cities like Shkrodra or in a village right outside of Tirana, but after all that build up, I got something perfect for me. It was like being on a crashing airplane. You make your peace with God and accept death, and then the airplane lands safely in the middle of a candy shop.”

Sometimes bracing during times of uncertainty helps us set the tone. Sometimes breathing sweet relief gets to set our tone. And sometimes reacting with calmness and confidence and conviction helps us reset the tone. Before Jordan moved to Lushnje, he had an encounter with a young man in his pre-service training town that he'll likely never forget. From his blog:

## Early Warning Signs

March 14, 2017

I was walking down the main street when I was yelled at from the rooftop of the nearby bar (the one my host brother had taken me to the first night). I looked up to see four Albanian young men, maybe teenagers or in their early twenties. One of them knew me through my host brother. They motioned for me to come upstairs and meet them.

I walked into the bar and went up to the third floor, where the bar has a space for people to stand on the roof and met them. They introduced themselves and asked me questions. There was one named Jesse who seemed to be the leader, or at least the most self-important, of the group. He was dressed sharply, in skinny jeans and white sneakers with a stylish, military-ish jacket. He puffed on a cigarette as he talked. He asked me many questions and never broke into a smile but seemed to glare at me

through narrow eyes as he questioned me. He swore often and had a dramatic, theatrical way of speaking, gesturing often and asking himself rhetorical questions that he would then answer. When he found out I was from America, he had one question.

"Why the \_\_\_\_\_ would you come to Albania? What are you doing here?"

I tried to explain about the Peace Corps and how I was a volunteer but he wasn't buying it.

"Nobody comes here. Look around! Where do you \_\_\_\_\_ think you are? This is nowhere." He held out his arms and gestured out in all directions. From our rooftop we could see the whole village and all the way to the mountains several miles off. "Look around. What do you see?"

He let the question hang. There was nothing in his tone that suggested friendliness and the tension was thick in the air. I knew he was just waiting for me to answer so he could continue his tirade so I shrugged and said the first thing I could think of.

"Trees. Mountains. Houses."

"Do you know what I see? Poverty. Corruption. You want to be a teacher but these people will not learn. You are from America. You are raised knowing these things. Opportunity. Hard work. You cannot teach it here. They are born without this and can never learn this. They do not know you or care about you in Albania, they only care how deep your wallet is."

"I think you're being too harsh. I like it here. It's very beautiful."

"You think I'm being harsh?!" He almost yelled "I am born Albanian, but grew up in Greece. Albanian in my blood. I came back here. The racism towards me, because of the way I talk. You have been here a few days? I have been here two months. You will see. You will not be here two years. Remember my words. My name is Jesse. Remember my name. Remember my words. You will not be in this \_\_\_\_\_ country for two

years. You cannot teach the students. They will not respect you. They will laugh at you, and you will leave. Remember my words."

Shortly thereafter I excused myself and left. I'm condensing our conversation but not exaggerating it. Jesse really did speak like a James Bond villain and the accent (people here sound like kind of like Russians) didn't help. I can say that I will not forget his name or his words, but I think he's wrong. He's the first person who's been anything but friendly towards me and he's obviously got his own chip on his shoulder. Later that day I was getting coffee at the same bar with one of the other Americans and I saw Jesse sitting with the other three young Albanian men. It's a small town and I'd probably see Jesse again. I was determined not to let his fatalistic demeanor set the tone of our future interactions so on my way out I let out a deep "Heeeeeeeeyyyyy Jesseeeeeeeee!!!" across the bar room and smiled confidently and nodded at him.

He smiled and nodded back.

Last June 14 I posted a photo of Jordan ringing a bell in the Peace Corps tradition at his Completion of Service ceremony. If I were Lin Manuel-Miranda, I would write the coolest rap in a letter to Jesse that he didn't know my son or his capacity or tenacity and veracity. But I'm not so I'll just write to Jordan thank you for your service and I'm glad you didn't throw away your shot. I'm so so proud of all you've done and more so who you are. And to Jesse, I'll say you were absolutely right - Jordan won't be there two years; he's going back to Albania this fall to teach middle and elementary age kids at the British School in the capital city of Tirana. Your fatalistic demeanor never set the tone. Remember his name.

I leave you with a favorite quote about tone setting: "Watch your thoughts; they become words. Watch your actions; they become habits. Watch your habits; they become character. Watch your character; it becomes your destiny." How we set the tone in our lives has a lot to do with how we live them. May our daily thoughts, words, actions, habits, characters, and destinies be rooted in sacrificial love. It will make for better days and make us part of a better team working together to set a better tone for the world we live it. Thanks be to God. Amen.