

Kenneth J. Hughes, SJ
St. Mary of the Angels Sunday OT 29 B 10/21/18
Isaiah 53:10-11; Hebrews 4:14-16; Mark 10:35-45

My Brothers and Sisters,

I love autumn, and I am sure that you do too.

I want to hold onto autumn as long as possible, and I am sure that you do too!

But, last Sunday, when I was flying out of Rochester, MN, after my sister's funeral, snow was falling, and had been falling all morning.

Winter was in the air.

Furthermore, after boarding the flight from Rochester to Minneapolis, the plane had to be moved aside for a thorough de-icing. Despite time constraints, no one was restless or complained about the fifteen minute delay. We all knew that it was for our safety, our well-being.

Much later, when I had time to reflect on my sister's funeral, the image of the plane de-icing came back to me. De-icing was a good image for what happened to my heart last weekend.

In many ways, my sister's large family has always intimidated me. Her children and grandchildren are all talented, well-educated and successful. Among them are doctors, lawyers, university professors, teachers, musicians, -- I even have a niece who is the founder and director of a wildlife reservation, specializing in wolves.

In the presence of this side of my family I can feel anxious.

But, for once, as I was leaving Boston, I was able to say to myself: "Ken, you don't need to be anxious. Just go as you are. You don't have to be someone. Don't put expectations on yourself. Just be present and loving."

Those words to myself were the de-icing of my heart. They unburdened me of my ego that gets so weighed down by self-image and self-preoccupation. I just went as myself, open and vulnerable.

And what happened? Well, I wept a lot -- wept more than I expected to and more than I had allowed myself, years ago, to weep for the death of my parents. I didn't say much. But I hugged each family member and listened to their stories.

Amazingly, in the process, I became more and more connected in a way I had never been connected before. And I had many, many heart-to-heart conversations. For once, ego concerns and ego expectations did not get in the way. Inside, I felt free and consoled.

In the Gospel today we see Jesus de-icing the hearts of his apostles, of James and John first, and then of the other ten.

Previously, in this Gospel, three times Jesus had tried to explain to the Twelve what was going to happen to him at the end of their journey to Jerusalem. He spoke clearly of his being handed over, his suffering, his crucifixion – also his life-giving resurrection.

Three times, they blocked out the message.

The first time, it was Peter, who rebuked Jesus for his message of suffering and failure.

The second time, it was the Twelve, who changed the topic to which of them was the greatest.

And now, the third time, it is James and John who come to Jesus seeking the two foremost positions of honor.

Sadly, these three, Peter, James and John were Jesus' closest disciples and friends. They were the special three he invited to witness his raising a young girl from the dead.

They were the special three whom he invited to witness his glorious transfiguration on Mt. Tabor.

With all these privileges, what kept them from being open to Jesus and his message?

Their egos. Egos, theirs and ours, desire to be in control. Egos need to be successful. Egos want to be recognized as better than others. Egos seek honor, reputation, demand proper “respect.” Egos want stroking, not suffering.

So, James and John say to Jesus, “Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left.”

What were they picturing in their imagination?

Perhaps, looking back, they remembered the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mt. Tabor. There they saw Moses and Elijah standing on each side of Jesus in glory. So, why not be the new Moses and the new Elijah flanking Jesus? Looking ahead, they are about to enter Jerusalem and they imagine that there Jesus will gather everyone to himself, declare his Messiahship, and the reign of God will begin with a new Israel claiming its land back from the Romans.

What a marvelous dream for Israel, and what a marvelous dream for themselves!

Just as Jesus stood between Moses and Elijah on Mt. Tabor, so now he will stand between James and John on the heights of Jerusalem. This will be their triumph!

Of course, it is all about ego and the trappings of ego. So, Jesus has to de-ice their hearts of ego expectations. What they don't realize is that what looks like glory to them is really an ego burden that is going to weigh them down.

There is a lesson here for all of us.

We are living in an ego-driven and ego-dominated world. Ego power is running rampant with cruel violence as we saw in Turkey this week, with demeaning tweets and twitters that we read every day, with the manipulation of truth and intimidating threats by those in power. How quickly our egos can be sucked into the vortex of vindictiveness. How often, these past few weeks has anger, rage, bitterness swept over and settled on my heart! My heart is still in need of a good de-icing.

As with his apostles, Jesus explains to us that the way to freedom and happiness of heart is not through power, possessions, reputation, but through loving service, through caring for others, even willing to make sacrifices for others – as Jesus did, who gave his very life for us.

At this time, then, may we continue to enjoy these beautiful days of autumn. But, if in any way, our hearts are burdened and our egos weighty, let us not wait for winter, but let the de-icing begin right now! Deeper peace and happiness will follow.

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