

Will you join me in prayer?

*Speak to us, God, for we are listening.*

*Speak to us, God, for we are waiting for your voice.*

*Speak to us, God, in our hearts and all around.*

*Show us what can be, what can be. Amen.*

So, you get me again! Turning up again, just like a bad penny, as my Grandma would say. The reason I preached LAST Sunday was so that Curran could spend some time with Katie and Ellis Jane over the holiday weekend - which was great. But it is a far more solemn occasion that brings me back to the pulpit this morning, as Curran's father, Dick, faces of a life-threatening medical crisis.

Curran wanted so badly to be with us this morning. She said to me, "Alan, be sure to tell 'em I love 'em." Indeed, we feel her love, and I know she feels ours as well. But, today, she needs to be right where she is: at the hospital, with her parents.

As Susan said earlier, things are better than they were with Dick. But he is still in ICU, and by no means is out of the woods. So, the family would very much welcome your continuing prayers and good wishes.

One of my favorite actors in the whole world is Lily Tomlin. And it is amazing and wonderful that at 80 years old, she is still entertaining us, still making us laugh, in the Netflix series "Grace and Frankie." Also, alongside her co-star and fellow activist, Jane Fonda, Tomlin is still speaking out and still getting arrested at protest demonstrations.

Years ago, Susan and I saw Lily Tomlin on Broadway, in her marvelous one-person play, called, "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe." It's a 3-act stage play in which she plays 12 different characters.

I remember hearing an interview with Lily Tomlin, in which she talked about a time when she was just starting out, and doing stand-up comedy. She had a chance to

be on television: an afternoon program.

She did the show; did her comedy routine; it all went fine.

Afterward, as she was leaving the NBC studios, by a side door, she was met by a homeless person: a bag lady. The woman's clothes were nothing but rags, she didn't look healthy, and her legs were covered with ulcerated sores. But she looked Lily Tomlin right in the eye and said, "Oh, thank you so much. That was wonderful. You gave me a good laugh, and I really needed that today." Apparently, she had watched the show on a monitor in the front window at NBC.

Lily said she was stunned by this encounter - this basic human connection. She said that it had a tremendous "leveling effect." "I realized, all of a sudden, that this 'bag lady' was a fellow human being, and that through humor I had connected with her."

Now, when I heard this interview, I had a little "Aha!" moment myself; for, if you've seen "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe," then you know that the main character is a bag lady, named Trudy.

Trudy serves as our guide in the "search for intelligent life in the universe." At first, she seems like a crazy person; but as the play goes along, exploring modern society, it gradually dawns on us that "crazy old Trudy" is, in fact, the one who actually shows signs of intelligent life.

My sense is that Lily Tomlin has a good grasp of "human connection." She knows that it's not about issues, like "the homeless problem," or "illegal immigrants." Nor is it the case that "We need to go help those poor people" - in Rwanda, or Guatemala, or the people who are camped out by the Field of Dreams here in Sonoma.

No. Where you and I need to start, instead, is with the realization that we are all just people, rich or poor. Whatever our circumstances, we are all human beings, with thoughts and feelings, hopes and dreams, strengths and weaknesses. We are brothers

and sisters: connected to each other.

These days, we hear so many news stories that tug at our hearts: war and famine, hurricanes and floods, a virus epidemic and, oh, so many refugees. However, most of those suffering people we hear about, we will never meet. By and large, we are disconnected from people who are outside of our own little circle, our own comfort zone.

And here in our lovely little Sonoma bubble, you and I are even more insulated from so much of the deep poverty and desperation of the world. It's not that we don't feel compassion; we do. But, most of the time, our connection with the wider human family is more "abstract concept" than it is "lived reality."

That's why the mission trips to Rwanda and to Guatemala and Nicaragua can be such a gift - because they are a chance to actually get to know people whose life circumstances may be quite different from us; but who, like us, have hopes and dreams, talents to share, joys to celebrate, and, problems to solve.

And this is why it matters so much that you and I get personally involved - right here in our own community - in the issues of homelessness, and tenants' rights, and the need for new, more creative housing solutions.

This coming week, I will be joining with some of you in doing the annual Point-In-Time count of those who are experiencing homelessness right here in Sonoma Valley. Early Friday morning, we will go search out places and people, gathering data to help us to better provide services.

And friends, we must never lose sight of the fact that people who cannot afford a decent place to live are not "The Homeless"; instead, they are Fred, and Rose, and Pedro, and William: human beings, just like us – with thoughts and feelings, hope and dreams. We are all connected; we are all God's children.

So. Today is Transfiguration Sunday, and I want to turn now to the extraordinary story that Lori read to us today from the Gospel of Matthew. Here, Jesus withdraws to a remote hillside to pray and meditate. He takes with him three of his core disciples: Peter, James, and John.

And as he is praying, his appearance suddenly changes: Jesus becomes dazzling white, and his face shines like the sun. And then he finds himself in the presence of two profound Jewish leaders from the past - Moses and Elijah. The three of them start talking together. Suddenly, a voice comes out of the clouds.: "This is my son; with whom I am well pleased!"

Now, what are we to make of this strange story? Well, first of all, notice that this passage begins with the phrase, "Six days later." Hmm. I wonder exactly what happened six days ago? Well, that's when Jesus and Peter had their big confrontation.

Jesus had just told his disciples, for the first time, that he was in trouble, and the authorities were probably going to arrest him and execute him. Peter protested: "No, no, that can't be right. We'll find another way. You don't have to die." Jesus got very angry at this, and said to Peter, "Get away! Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block."

From this forceful reaction, it's pretty clear that Peter hit a nerve. No doubt, Jesus didn't want to die. I mean, how could it be that he is going to be killed - just when his ministry is getting started?

So, my sense is that, six days later, as Jesus withdraws to the mountain to pray, he is still wrestling with this, and he is deeply unsettled. And there, on the mountain-top, he has a religious experience; he has a vision. It's like I noted last Sunday: these things seem to come to us when we are most troubled and unsettled.

Now maybe it's a flash of insight; or maybe it is a voice from the heavens, or a vision of Moses and Elijah. Or maybe it is all those things. The point is that Jesus now realizes now that he will accomplish his mission through his death; and that his crucifixion will not be the end of his ministry, but the fulfillment of it, that his death on the cross will become a means of God's grace, a demonstration of God's unconquerable love.

Thus, I see this mountain-top experience as the moment when the narrative shifts for Jesus, as he realizes that he is destined to be a very different kind of Messiah; that he is never going to be a popular leader, and is never going to have a 40-year career as beloved wisdom teacher. No.

As you may know, the Transfiguration story is the prescribed reading every year on the Sunday just before Ash Wednesday, the Sunday before Lent begins - which seems just right. For this is the moment for us – much like Jesus - when the narrative shifts, and we are called to pivot from the sparkling joy of Christmas and Epiphany to the more somber tones of Lent.

The season of Lent is a time to remember what we are up against, and what the Gospel of God is up against, in an unjust world – a world filled with fear and cynicism. During Lent, we are reminded that there is a cost involved if we intend to bring healing to this broken world. And if we plan to participate in building God's kin-dom of justice and peace, we had better know that it is hard and dangerous work.

For the truth is that life is not all sweetness and light, for any of us. There are problems - Big Problems - that defy solutions. There is pain and disappointment. Our ideas are rejected. Our hopes are dashed. We see the good guys lose again and again, while the bad guys prosper.

Or, tragedy strikes. The stability we counted on turns wobbly. It is so easy to become discouraged; so easy to lose our footing, or lose our way. We are continually tempted to give up the fight, and just settle for what is.

Now, Curran is planning to talk about trauma during the Lenten season - although I'm quite sure she didn't expect to be going through the personal trauma that she and her family are currently experiencing.

But her plan is to talk about the many faces of trauma – political trauma, environmental trauma, ancestral trauma, and so forth. And above all, through it all, she will talk about healing and hope.

Now I don't really know any more than that; but my guess is that a lot of the healing she will talk about comes from human connection, and from the love and support and hope that we offer one another.

For the simple fact is that we need each other in the midst of the hardships and uncertainties of daily life. If we are going to fight the good fight, for justice and peace, we need each other. Mutual support and companionship are vital to each one of us on the journey.

I have greatly enjoyed the class on Aging that Todd Evans has been leading – mostly because of the very human connection. We have discussed the grief and the losses that come with aging – oh, so many kinds of loss; but all the while, we also have focused on the joys of aging and the contentment that comes with the passing of years - as you realize all that stuff you just don't have to worry about anymore: responsibilities and burdens, ego and vanity.

And as I look around that circle at people like Helen and Louise and others who have been aging gracefully for a long time, I am just grateful to have such marvelous companions on the journey.

Dear friends, it's a tough world out there, and it can be a lonely world. But our church family stands ready to help us become the fully-alive, passionate, and compassionate people that God intends us to be.

By the grace of God, may this be a church community where we laugh and have fun together; as well as a place where we feel each other's pain and bear one another's burdens. May it continue to be a place where we are both challenged and equipped to make a difference in the world.

Amen.