Dec. 23, 2018 | Forth Sunday of Advent

Mi 5:1-4a
Heb 10:5-10
Lk 1:39-45


This year, the final week of Advent is as short as it can be — literally one day — but the readings are worth our attention, especially the Gospel passage about what the tradition calls the “Visitation.” Luke tells us that the first thing the young Mary does after saying yes to the angel’s announcement is to make the journey to see her elderly cousin Elizabeth, whom she has learned is also with child.

The teaching is clear. Discipleship is about saying yes to God’s Plan in Jesus. In Mary’s case (Mary the first disciple) she offers her “Fiat.” She doesn’t understand how she could be pregnant but nonetheless she says, “Be it done unto me as YOU say.” But, note well that the words are immediately followed with action: she goes to help her cousin, whom she knows is not just advanced in age but has no experience with pregnancy. Of course, Mary herself has no experience with being pregnant, but maybe that itself is the point: often we “help” just by being present to and standing with a person in need.

How might that apply to us today? One thinks immediately of migrants and asylum seekers detained at our Southern border. We might not have all the answers for how to “solve” the immigration issue, but there are a host of organizations like Catholic Relief Services that offer ways to allow us to “stand with” those who are caught up in the crossfire of our domestic politics.

To come at it another way, the Mary-Elizabeth story is a marvelous vignette of one woman ministering to another, made all the more poignant given the difference in their ages. The young Mary takes the initiative to be present to the elderly Elizabeth. This is “service” at its best: the strong ministering to the less strong — given the particulars of Elizabeth’s situation, the “vulnerable.”

Again, that scenario is an invitation to us today. Here in our Abbey, soon after the administration began separating families at the Southern border, a group from the Sunday worshipping community gathered together to look for ways to bring aid and support to the many migrant farm worker families living in our own Chester County outside Philadelphia.

Guided by the experience of two Hispanic members of the group, we soon had a list of ways to serve. There was a family who needed help with their electric bill, and another was in need of money to pay tuition at their parish school. Next, we learned of a migrant mother and her two young daughters who were about to be evicted from their trailer home and had no place to stay. One of our families took them in, while we worked with the local authorities to find them a more permanent place to stay. Then we were told of two other families who were seeking asylum and needed help with a lawyer which we were able to provide. With an eye to see and a desire to serve, there is no shortage of opportunities to “minister to the vulnerable.”

Final thought. We soon will celebrate the “octave” (eight days) of Christmas. The liturgical logic behind the practice is obvious: the feast needs more than one day — and so we give time to let the “Good News” unfold: about the God who loved us enough to give up the glory of heaven and so self-empty by taking on human flesh. In so doing, Jesus shows us the way, heals our wounds, would make us one. It seems
appropriate then that we try to “live the octave” by giving to others in some fashion as the Lord has given to us — not just to family and friends but to those who live on the margins. How will you use these eight days?

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