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From the Clergy Associate for Family Ministries

January Message

Dear friends,

One of my favorite learnings from Terry Battaglia in a recent Moms Group conversation was the game “Rose and Thorn” to be played at the dinner table (or in my case, it is now my daughters’ and my daily ritual as we drive home from school).

Each person shares a “rose” and a “thorn” from the day. And the others listen patiently and honor the offering of the speaker. No judgments are made on the offerings of another—the engagement is as delightful and simply profound as beholding a beautiful rose in a garden.

What a blessed discipline—to rejoice in the presence of fellow flowers in God’s garden, roses and thorns and all. Something the world could use a bit more these days, I think...

During our Advent Quiet Day, I shared the summary of a short video clip: A dog stands on the rear deck of a moving whaler in the ocean. The pup slips from the deck into the wake, and the boat moves on without him. Sharks circle beneath his flailing paws as he tries in vain to catch up with the boat. Up rises a dolphin to intervene with the sharks. After knocking the approaching shark off course, the dolphin takes the waterlogged animal onto its back for a ride back to the boat. The endearing interaction between dog and dolphin involves flippers and paws waving, and even a kiss. My daughters and I watched this video together following a conversation about bullies and standing up for people in need. When we finished watching the movie, I looked at the girls and said, “You are going to find yourselves in many different situations in life. Sometimes you will be the dog. Other times you will have the chance to be either shark or dolphin...choose wisely.”

Life is full of choices. Our faith and the way we practice what we believe informs these choices. In the sixth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus discusses some of the most important tenets of practicing our faith. Almsgiving for God, not for our own credit; praying simply and quietly, in

private—fasting, also, not to be seen. Storing up treasures in heaven. Serving one master. Do not worry.

One modern translation of the Bible gives chapter six the header, “The world is not a stage.”¹ This header highlights the role of our motivations in the practice of our faith. The truth is, we can become so culturally attuned and accustomed to focusing on impressing people that if we aren’t careful, that behavior can carry over into the way we practice our faith.

Yet as Jesus reminds us, our relationship with God is not about impressing people—or God. We do not exist to impress God. We exist in relationship with God. Relationships require conversation. Noticing and paying attention and listening to God all the time.

Prayer is conversation with God. Prayer is acknowledgement of God. Prayer is dependence upon God recognized and actualized. Jesus reminds us to pray in simple humility. Prayer is different from every other conversation we enter. Prayer does not even have to be spoken for God to understand us. Remember what St. Paul wrote about the Holy Spirit interceding with sighs too deep for words when we do not know what to pray (Romans 8:26)?

Our relationship with God is different from every other relationship we have. We are completely open books to God. We cannot rely on our way with words to dazzle God. Neither do we have to work hard to articulate what is going on within our deepest hearts to God. We cannot hide anything from God, to whom “all hearts are open, all desires known, from whom no secrets are hid.”² God knows.

With God, we can be simple; straightforward; completely ourselves. And, whether or not we are honest with ourselves, God does see us as we are. We are beloved. We are broken. We are dependent. We make mistakes. We need forgiveness. We have an incredible capacity for passion—we are able to love deeply and dangerously capable of hating passionately. We need God like no one else. And God is there for us like no one else.

The bottom line is: we need to stay in conversation with God. We need to notice God and listen for God in the world all around us.

Dolphin, dog, shark. Rose, thorn. Life. Death. Resurrection. God is in all and through all. We can run, but we cannot hide—so why try? Why not turn to God for the listening God can offer to us? As Jesus reminded us, let us do so, not for anyone else to see but God.

Faithfully yours,
The Rev. Cathy Quinn
Clergy Associate for Family Ministries

¹ *The Message*, page 1754

² *The Book of Common Prayer*, page 355