

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Psalm 119:1-8
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

The Rev. Elizabeth Locher
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
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On Friday morning as I was walking to my car to come to church, I looked and saw that I had been plowed in. Over a foot of snow was heaped in a big mound behind my car. But that had happened earlier this winter, and it had been no problem then to brush that fluffy snow out from behind the car with my ice scraper. So I continued toward the car.

As I came around the corner to the driver's side, I was dismayed to discover 6 inches deep of snow blocking my path to the door. Since I was bootless, it looked like I was about to get wet.

But it turned out that the snow had crusted over in the night, and I could walk right over it without falling through. My feet stayed dry, it felt sort of miraculous to walk on top of the snow, I retrieved my ice scraper from the car, and I walked around to the back of my car to tackle my snow mountain.

And that's when I discovered the connection. Like the snow I had just enjoyed walking over, this pile blocking my car's exit had frozen. The ice scraper was no match for it. I went back to my apartment for the snow shovel my husband and I have treasured since the so-called "Snowpocalypse" of 2009. But even with that plastic shovel, it was slow, difficult going to chip away at the ice.

I wasn't the only person in my parking lot out freeing their car, but my spot had definitely gotten the worst of the plowing in, and it was a daunting task I was faced with.

But the amazing thing I discovered as I labored on was how many people – strangers – stopped to offer me help. Many of these were the people I see in the elevator each day, whom I would like to know, but don't. Suddenly they were offering to give their time and their strength to me.

They saw that daunting task I was faced with and spontaneously offered assistance, whether or not there was much they could do. It seemed that the difficulty of my situation moved them to want to help. And I was deeply moved by their constant stream of generosity.

Now digging out of snow is really a minor inconvenience, and this week our parish has been shaken by the serious news of Fr. Malm's accident last Sunday night. As we heard the news we prayed fervently and waited anxiously to hear how surgery and recovery would go. Now we have good news that surgery went well, that Fr. Malm has a brace that is relieving pain and allowing him to begin to move around.

We know, too, that there is a long road ahead. For him as he heals and recovers. For us, too, in our continuing ministry and mission here at Grace Church, where we feel the loss that he can't be back with us yet. Where we have to rearrange and share extra responsibilities and continue ministry without our rector here with us.

And we may, perhaps, have had moments of wondering if we can – if we have the strength, each of us and as a parish community, to continue our mission and ministry. And already, through the outpourings of love, the offers of every kind of help to those who need it, and the concern members of our community have shown for each other, God has been showing and assuring us that we do have the strength to serve.

And even though it was a small thing, on Friday morning after a long week I was moved, in that parking lot full of snow, by the kindness of strangers who walked by me and offered help. And I felt that God was reminding me, through them as well, of His Love. How He offers it to us often through the love of others. How adversity – small and great – sometimes helps us to notice Love – the Love of God – more clearly, and helps bring communities together in love and care and ministry to each other.

It's as we prayed in the Collect of the Day today – God offers Himself, in Love and power, as the source of strength to all who put their trust in Him. Even in our weakness, or our anxiety, God is always there, offering His strength in love to everyone who needs it. We can trust that He will always offer it.

And the passage from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians today is also a deep reminder that God is our Source of strength and grace and love. We heard a verse this morning that always fills me with a sort of quiet awe. Paul writes reflecting on the various ministers who served the Corinthian community. He says, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."

It is as though each one of the Corinthians, and each one of us, is a seed, and the mysterious and miraculous workings of God's love and power in our lives gradually transforms us into something that seems almost entirely new and different – a thriving plant.

And we are helped, along the path of that transformation, by others who have joined into the service of God's work in us. And we help to plant, or water, or tend, and serve God's process of giving growth to others as well.

But ultimately, Paul reminds in this passage, it is God's power that makes that growth possible. Paul's community at Corinth was experiencing division because people were putting too much focus on who had baptised them and not remembering that it is ultimately God who works the transformation of each of us in baptism and throughout our lives.

And Paul reminds us, too, that we never do ministry alone. The hands and hearts of many people are joined in the service of Christ – planting and watering and tending. And Christ Himself is always there with us in the power and the love that ultimately works to transform peoples' lives. We have a great responsibility and a great commission in our ministry, but we also have a constant source of hope and support and help.

This image of growing and thriving plants reminds me of a parable Jesus uses in the Gospel according to Mark. He says, "The Kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself – first the bud, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear."

Jesus describes the miraculous transformation from seed to plant and points to the mystery of that transformation – the sower "knows not how" the sprouting and the growing happen. Because it is God, our wonderful and mysterious God, who gives the growth.

We do not always even perceive the nature of transformations within ourselves, as God reaches out to us with His Love and draws us into Life, and growth, and Love, and service. We have days of progress, each of us, and day of waiting, and even days of backsliding.

But hope is always with us, because God is always calling us and drawing us and leading us into new things. Giving us the strength to do these things by nourishing us with unlooked-for grace, with unearned, incomprehensible Love – often shown forth through the actions, love, and ministry of the people around us. God gives the growth, and so we can always trust Him and not be afraid.

In our own growth, and in our own ministry to those around us as well, we have this constant assurance. When ministry feels easy and when it seems too hard, we are always assured, as Paul also says, that "God's power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine." We cooperate in our lives with the working, living, and active power of God.

We do the same as a community here, as this parish. God is present and working, sometimes in hidden ways, sometimes visibly, all around us – offering Grace, sharing Love, and giving growth. And we, as fellow ministers, as the household of God, can always turn to Him for help, find in Him our strength, and be drawn or driven out to serve His work of transforming, loving, and growing the hearts and the lives of all people.