

Proper 12B – July 26, 2015
2 Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

**The “Soft Arts”: preparing hearts to receive the Abundance of the Lord
in all the breadth, length, height and depth of who He is**

Just as Jesus led his disciples and the crowd from a sense of scarcity to abundance in the feeding of the 5000 in our gospel; so also, in our second reading, Paul leads all of us to a similar awareness of God’s abundant and immeasurable love that is God in Christ. One of my favorite Biblical descriptions of God’s all-encompassing presence and embrace is found in this reading from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:18-19).

Those words—“breadth and length and height and depth”—although sounding like measurements that can define and limit, in fact describe an abundant and immeasurable reality that is beyond us, around us and within us. But that doesn’t stop most of us from anxiously trying to measure God’s love and to know whether God loves some of us more or less than He loves others of us in the human family. So, is God’s love for some deeper, higher or longer than for others, as if we could measure it, say, with a measuring cup, or a tape measure, or a stop watch? Well, as far as filling a measuring cup goes, we hear in the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want....my cup runneth over” (Psalm 23:1,5). If our cup runs over with God’s love, a measuring cup sure won’t suffice. And neither would a tape measure if we can fathom what the 108th Psalm is saying when it declares that God’s “steadfast love is higher than the heavens” (Psalm 108:4). And although a watch is useful for some, to measure an Olympic race—or how long the preacher’s sermon will last this morning—such an instrument of measure falls far short of the 103rd Psalm’s assertion that “the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting” (Psalm 103:17). Again, let Paul’s words sink in, “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” How do you measure a love like that? Well, we can’t—and so, we don’t need to—but we can experience it deep in our hearts and minds and share it, and we do so as we acknowledge that the Immeasurable One, whose power and love are already at work within us, is able to accomplish far more than we are able to desire or imagine or produce.

Here in this parish, and in communities of faith all across the denominational and interfaith spectrum, a significant amount of work is done, be it the more mundane “church work” that most religious institutions find necessary, or the more significant “work of the church” that engages the church in Christ’s mission of repairing the world. Yet, in whatever ways we are engaged, we must take care lest we give the impression that the most important work of the church is meeting a budget, or fixing a facility, or developing programs. Those are necessary and worthy goals, and measurable ones. However, the ultimate goal is

preparing hearts to receive the Lord fully into our lives, in all the breadth, length, height and depth of who he is and where we encounter Him. It is a difficult goal to measure. Whether it's in the breadth of remembering God's action in our history and in our lives, or in the length of "running the race," as it were, living our lives fully in the Spirit until the day we die—or whether it's through the heights of worship or the depths of serving or struggling with those in need—again, these are paths to an encounter with the immeasurable love of God.ⁱ And all that is the work of the Spirit. We contribute to the Spirit's work in many ways in the work I've described, but especially in the prayerful and relational elements that underlie that work. What do I mean by that? Let me cite some examples adapted from a wonderful article in which author Larry McNeil discusses certain less measurable "soft arts," as he calls them, which are fundamental to a healthy, purposeful church.ⁱⁱ They include: listening which includes empathy and relating; being thoughtful; and practicing rituals of praise and prayer, relationship and action. These are important habits. We can have the "hard arts" of inspiring worship, solid Christian formation and education, focused outreach and faithful stewardship, but without those "soft arts" we might have a weak pulse, little spirit, slow motion, and not enough soul. Let's look at these "soft arts" for a moment.

First, there's Listening, empathy, and relating. Those who feel heard become more open, creating opportunity for connection, the real glue of church and other organizations. The strongest churches and organizations budget chunks of time for people to listen to one another. The listening called for in all this is empathic, from the Greek word *empathia*, meaning affection, passion. It involves asking questions and learning people's individual stories and how their stories fit into the bigger story of their family, their community, their church and their faith journey. It is the work of this parish to solicit and honor the particularity of each person's story, so that we can join together in making sense of the bigger forces at work around us.

When we hear and tell a story, and connect to another human being, we are relating, obviously. Unfortunately we don't do this often enough. Instead we are often only "in contact" with many people, often on the fly, and electronically rather than face-to-face, often not even hearing the other person's voice. We do see and are seen by others, but we don't always have or take the time to tell our story, to say what's really on our mind, or to hear someone else's story. We "touch base" with others, but we don't take the time to meet one-to-one with others, to understand their lives and interests and reveal our interests to them, to find common matters to possibly work on together.ⁱⁱⁱ I must say though, we are making a good effort here in our parish in being intentional in the habits of relating, the "soft art" of listening and empathy, of engaging in meeting more than meetings; yet there is room, always, for improvement.

The second habit or "soft art" is that of thoughtfulness. Thoughtfulness means paying attention, being considerate of other people. Acts of love are grounded on thoughtfulness. Thoughtfulness manifests itself in the small things: chairs and tables are set up right; people are greeted; less verbal people are folded into conversations and discussions; opinions are solicited; time is spent bringing people up to date; participation is valued over sophistication; time is respected; recognition is given in appropriately large doses; parish

assignments and roles are matched to what people need for their growth; assignments are given with proper direction and time to be successful; we are on time and prepared; and we take and share responsibility for the outcomes. Those are just a few examples.

The final habit or “soft art” that marks strong parish life is that of the rituals of praise and prayer, relationship and action. Ritual transcends the present and connects past, present, and future. Part of the wisdom of our living liturgical tradition is that rituals with regular though flexible rhythm are more important than sporadic, spectacular ones. The defining ritual in this parish is the Holy Eucharist in which every person present can directly participate prayerfully and repeatedly in the mystery of our Christian faith. It is also important to see the dynamics of ritual in our other gatherings whether in groups or one-to-one.^{iv}

I’ve suggested that the way to approach some of the more measurable “hard arts” of our parish life and work—public Worship, Christian Formation, Mission or Outreach, and Stewardship—is through these less measurable “soft arts.” So, let us ask ourselves some questions. Am I listening? Am I empathic—standing in someone else’s shoes? Am I being thoughtful in my relationship with other people? Am I a faithful adherent of our life-giving rituals? This, in turn, may lead to some more specific questions. How are we treating the members and leaders we have? Is our church community part of the center of their interests? How many people have their story at stake in our collective strategies and ministries? How many people are participating in discussions about worship, education, outreach, money? How are we building a more relational culture?

The day-in and day-out practice of these “soft arts” builds unbreakable bonds between people, creating organizational sinew, as it were—strong and flexible, not subject to break under stress and pressure, a strong, loving and hopeful Body of Christ. This parish is such a Body. Let us continue to be so.

So, my prayer for all of us today is that of St. Paul, “that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:18-19).^v

ⁱ As Jesus put it another way, “...strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33)—including our buildings and resources, our programs and ministries. So, as we engage in mission, create budgets, fix buildings, organize ministries, we need to keep in mind that the most important work of the church takes place often in the midst of these seemingly measurable activities, but at a much less visible, less measurable level.

ⁱⁱ Larry B. McNeil, “The Soft Arts of Organizing”, in *Social Policy* (Winter 1995), pp. 17-22.

ⁱⁱⁱ So we have the habit of meetings, but not really meeting. We need to curb our habits of falling into “relational ruts” that cut us off from the great variety and energy and talent that reside in those who walk through the doors of our church.

^{iv} Can we get to a point where our parish meetings are short, clear, participatory and aimed toward action? Stronger churches are action-oriented, pay good attention to briefing people ahead of time, do proper

evaluation afterwards, keep the meetings short and few, and ensure that the leaders are trained as needed—and they do this repeatedly.

^v Or otherwise translated, “that you may understand how wide, how long, how high, and how deep God’s love really is. May you experience it, though it is so great you will never fully understand it.”