

September, 2019

Dear friends,

I am back! Thank you for making it possible for me to take some time off for a sabbatical. I spent most of my time in India at an Ayurvedic retreat center in meditation, yoga and such, and a good chunk of time with my mother being spoiled by her cooking while learning to play the mirudhangam, a south Indian drum. Finally, I spent a week with Roja, Eklan and Jenna Rosco (St. Luke's, Fairport) at the home for young girls, Thai, which means mother in Tamil. We returned and settled Eklan at SUNY Purchase, and are figuring out this empty-nester thing.

Sunday, I lead the liturgy as we closed out the summer at [Garrett Chapel](#) on Keuka Lake. Garrett Chapel is a jewel in our Diocese entrusted to the care of the Bishop of Rochester. We have made it an ecumenical center of worship with Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal clergy leading services. While there, I ran into Hope, a young woman who grew up at Christ Church in Pittsford. She was in high school and part of a youth mission team from our Diocese in August of 2009 to the Gulf Coast to help rebuild after Hurricane Katrina--our hearts and prayers go out to all impacted by Hurricane Dorian now. I was encouraged to meet Hope who serves in Washington DC. She is aptly named and is one among other young women leading positive change.

Greta Thunberg, still a teenager, is a Swedish activist who is autistic and a clear leader for climate action. A bullet to her head did not stop Nobel Peace Prize recipient Malala Yousafzai from advocating for children's education globally out of Pakistan. At 18, Emma González, a survivor of a school shooting in the US went on to become an advocate for gun control. At 17, Amika George saw the inequity in women's health and started the #freeperiods movement to right this wrong in the UK. Roja and I met Banu Priya, who is 12, at Thai, a safe space for girls to thrive that Roja has helped sustain for over twelve years. She is one of twenty other girls doing extremely well at school. She is proving that children from the manual scavenging community are capable of doing extremely well academically. She placed third in the entire district last year in her grade five exams. These inspiring young girls and women are showing us the way of resurrection. Hope is real, and I am glad she is alive and well!

While in India, I felt a deep sense of tenuousness as I traveled this summer to visit my friend, Raj Gopal. I had not seen Raj since my undergrad days when we were classmates studying Zoology. Our Facebook friendship since those days had not been of any real substance. Back in June, I got some desperate calls from classmates asking me to get in touch with Raj. I reached out. To my horror, I found out that he has an inoperable brain tumor that is also aggressively cancerous. Raj was upbeat on the phone then, still brimming with his smart and quick wit. He took some humorous swipes at me being a Bishop. It seemed like time stood still for us to catch up.

I prayed as I traveled on an August day to Bengaluru, taking an early morning train from Chennai. I wanted to be with Raj and his beloved wife for a few hours. I learned early as a pastor that presence is often the most important aspect of pastoral care. It seemed like the one thing I could do apart from pray. Just showing up when nothing else makes sense still makes sense! To pause and bear witness to this thin, yet hard and painful place is all I could do. It is often the only thing that any of us can do.

At this point, I am not so much asking why, as I am curious about this mysterious place of tenuousness that is stirring sensibilities about love, life, and meaning. It is very visceral for his wife, who has to care for him like he is a baby since he is in progressive stages of paralysis. Their daughter, who lives in Singapore, flies in and out whenever she is able. The grace with which his wife is navigating this tenuous and confusing time is remarkable. The honesty in her reflections with me was raw and real.

Suddenly, all the pettiness of issues, misunderstandings in relationships, disappointments caused or experienced, all seem suspended as real, yet significantly minuscule. A deep silence wells up as I think about my own mortality and about how I would react when I am told my time is limited if I should be blessed to have such a time! I feel a deep sadness for Raj's beloved, and their daughter. Their collective faith has been stretched so much through this ordeal. Maybe they will be okay, but it pains me that they have had to go through this time.

I also wonder why we humans do harmful things like separate families at the border or because of war, violence, poverty, and disease. Why I wonder, do we still play politics with things like race and any other issues of identity when life is so tenuous? Could we ever find our way to our senses and be a little more understanding, a little more kind, a little less obsessed with the messiness of life and more attentive to our relationships? It takes courage to be kind.

I was heartened to hear that many of you rang bells to commemorate [1619](#). My encounter with Raj has reminded me again that life is tenuous! Perhaps, we can be kinder to each other. Maybe we can handle life with some intention.

Have a good program year wherever you are in life at home, at school, or at work!

With affection,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. L. S.', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.