

Picking Straw Out of Velcro

Homily from Sunday Service 5/14/17

by Nanci Armstrong-Temple

Most years we try to make it to the Full Belly Farm Hoes Down Festival. My whole Bay Area family attended the 25th Anniversary of this organic farm that boasts a full-time, year-round staff of 60 farm workers, all of whom earn a living wage and have health care coverage. It was full of games and activities and vendors and food and performers and tons and tons of people.

And they also had a giant straw fort that the kids could climb onto, into, and around.

I'm allergic to straw, so I'm incredibly grateful that my kids were old enough that I didn't feel compelled to climb through the fort with them. And because I went with my amazing mother in law, I also didn't have to brave the Sudan grass maze, which, it turns out, I'm also allergic to.

But the combination of straw, grass, the creek, the slide into mud (which I never actually saw but did see evidence of when my children returned from it dripping and beaming) and the tennis shoes they were wearing (I'd never been before, so I had no idea they'd need both bathing suits and water shoes) meant that we brought a lot of straw and grass and mud home.

The girls sweet dad managed to wash the shoes and get them dry. I got to take the time to pick the grass and straw from not only the Velcro but from the inside of the shoes that might as well be but isn't quite Velcro.

This one job, that will go unnoticed in the grand scheme of life and which is just one of the millions of little and (largely) unappreciated things that I and parents everywhere do every day, will make it so my children can wear their shoes again and learn and play without the discomfort and occasional injury that can be caused by straw (and mud, and wood chips, and some other things I can't quite identify). Each job like this takes 5 or 10 or 45 minutes or 20 years. I do them gratefully, even knowing I will not receive praise or accolades or awards. I do it alongside all the millions of other parents who do all the hundreds of unnoticed things that we do so that our children get what they need. This is not martyrdom; this is the pact we make when we decide to bring new people into the world.

But it would be nice if it were a bit more acknowledged in our society. And if I were in charge, here's how I'd acknowledge the work we do.

I'd have Universal, single payer health care for families. This is not a hand out; it honors the fact that we are all responsible for the children that we raise, not just the one or two or three adults who choose to bring them into the world.

We'd all have flexible work schedules, which are not a special privilege for only the elite; they acknowledge that the pace of life does not happen in eight hour shifts, but in ups and downs and ebbs and flows and lots of time for play and rest and naps and eating well.

And speaking of eating well, all GMO food would be labelled (and gotten rid of, ASAP) and all toxic chemicals would be banned from food production. Period. They make farm workers sick, they make children sick, they make animals sick. Organic food should be a right; no one should have to choose between pesticides and rent.

And speaking of rent. Since I'm already so far out here, lets talk about housing. Universal housing should be a right, not a privilege. No more homelessness. No person, whether adult or child, should be without shelter.

Maybe none of these things relates to child rearing, to you. But as I see my struggles and the struggles of families everywhere around me and the stress caused by all of us trying to get by and get what we need and get our children what they need, I keep seeing disconnection and desperation and unhappiness. It's not necessary. Life may be difficult, but it's made more so by ridiculous policies that benefit a few wealthy people at the expense of the rest of society. And that benefit is still only an illusion: when people all around you are angry and frustrated you need more and more to keep you isolated. In a world where everyone has their basic needs for food, work, shelter and time met there is much less need for violence, and much less need for security.

This week I made a donation to the #FreeBlackMamas campaign so that unjustly incarcerated moms could be out of jail and with their families on Mother's Day. Despite the complicated feelings that Mother's Day can bring up for folks, no one could win an argument with me that says that parents should be separated from their children by debtors' prison.

And our collection today will partially go to Healthy Black Families, a group of local Black folks who empower themselves and other Black folks to raise powerful Black families.

So...even though we don't live in that idealized world, I'll keep doing my best to make it as real as possible in every way I can. I'll keep supporting local and national organizations, and friends and family the best I can. Keep buying organic, even when I can't afford it. Keep voting and working for change locally and state and country wide. And keep speaking truth to power, and to fear, even when my voice shakes. And, for my kids and yours, I'll keep picking straw out of Velcro.

Nanci Armstrong-Temple

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