



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States
Monthly Message for the Priests Wives
February 2021

Hollow Gestures

My Dearest Sister in Christ,

It has been tough few months. A good friend of mine lost her firstborn son right before Christmas—just six months after his wedding. Another friend's mother was diagnosed with terminal brain disease. Friends have miscarried, been fired from jobs, gotten divorced—even lost fingers.

As I get older, I am faced more often with increasingly difficult situations, and I don't feel very equipped to be helpful. I can't bring back a child, cure a disease, employ the unemployed or heal rifts in marriages. I can't even grow a finger back.

The things that I can do feel so weak, futile, and hollow. As I look at people around me that are struggling with real, deep pain, it feels like I can't do anything worthwhile for them. What's a text, a phone call, or a visit in the face of sorrow? What's a casserole dish, a coffee date, or a night of babysitting in the face of grief?

All I have are eyes full of tears, a heart full of prayers, and empty, feeble hands. What I want to do, what I long to do, is to make the problems vanish—to erase them, undo them, heal them. The text, the phone call, the hug, the visit, the tears, yes, even the prayers feel so hollow, so ineffective.

There's a *gap* between my desire and my ability, the relief I want to bring a beloved friend and the little that is in my hand to actually do. A gaping hole that aches.

What I can't see, what I sometimes fail to acknowledge is *who* is working in the gap: **GOD**. God is working in the gap between my desire and my ability. These tiny actions feel ineffective for the simple reason that they are not acts of power or authority but acts of surrender. They are acts that require courage and humility and trust in God. The gap has always been filled by God.

Picture with me the once-fisherman Andrew bringing Jesus Christ the five loaves and two fish of the little boy. What was his attitude as he approached? Was he blushing furiously in shame as I

would have done, saying—disbelieving his own voice—"This is what we have"? Was he approaching in arrogance—"Look, we told you so; we definitely do not have enough—send them away"? Or was he approaching with open curiosity? "My Lord, I cannot wait to see what you'll do"?

I can't imagine a hollower gesture than handing five loaves and two fish to my Master and looking back at the crowd of 5,000 men in panic. And yet. *And yet.* The 5,000 were filled (Matthew 14:20).

What we need is the faith of the centurion who sent word to Christ saying, "Only speak a word, and my servant will be healed" (Matthew 8:8). Like the centurion, we must acknowledge God's power, acknowledge all the things He knows and can do that we do not know and cannot do. We have to surrender to the helplessness of being human. We are like the grass "which today is and tomorrow is thrown into the oven" (Luke 12:28).

God works in the gap. You make the phone call, but God times it perfectly. You compose and send the text, but it's the Spirit's stirring that puts a smile on a face that was weary before. Our small and weak acts of love are not in themselves divine. They are made effective by the work of God. We say "prayer moves mountains," but surely we remember that it's God who moves mountains. He fills the gap between our fragile words and a superhuman act.

Isn't it interesting that we aren't asked to fix each other's problems (where we cannot) but are instead asked to carry the problems together? Saint Paul says to the Galatians, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). We aren't told to make each other's grief, pain, loss, illness or sorrow disappear. He says carry the burdens with each other.

There are so many situations today that need a so-called hollow gesture: "I'm sorry for your loss" "Can I bring you anything?" "Happy birthday" "I miss you." Often we won't know or see how God is working in the gap. How a happy birthday message, for example, can stave off suicidal thoughts for a little longer! How a funny face emoji can make person laugh who hasn't laughed in weeks! We might not see the results at all, might never be privy to the secret workings of the Holy Spirit in the heart, but that does not make our efforts hollow or ineffective. It makes every effort more needed, as tools in the hands of an Almighty God.

May God give us the courage, humility, and trust in Him it takes to offer even the very little we have, so that His name be glorified.

Your sister in Christ,

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