

Sometimes we wonder why we are here.... or “why we stay” as one Christian singer asks. One answer given is “Blest Be the Tie that Binds!” Psalm 133 declares: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity. Peace, Harmony, Love have always been the goals of faith. The famous passage this morning from the letter of John (whose community was often feuding over teachings about Jesus) reiterates the mandate to “LOVE one another.” This mandate of God shows up in Hebrew scripture and is echoed by Jesus several times, especially at the Last Supper. We are “intentional family”... all living into the beauty of Christ’s Way and teachings. You may remember the Scripture and camp song: “They’ll know we are Christians by our LOVE.”

We look to theologians, elders and mentors in faith, those who have kept the faith for many years; we remember their words and their writings. Here at Belleville, one of them who passed on into God’s realm recently, was ANNA MAY GUYETTE, a poet of faith in our midst, who wrote the new lyrics for Forward through the Ages, for 2008 Belleville Bicentennial: “Forward through the ages....move “the Belleville spirits” (move the faithful spirits was the original). Anna May found a “love-your-neighbor community” here at Belleville, and she helped to nurture it with a very steadfast spirit of peace and love; she was very quiet, behind the scenes. One of her prayers that she said often was: *“Help us to help each other, in friendship and brotherly and sisterly love, so that Peace On Earth will become a reality in our time, not just for a select few, but for everyone.”*

Before “Peace On Earth” and loving one’s neighbor, first I want to talk about the INNER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY (Love for God), that usually starts with gratitude. Anna lived very simply, and got by with very little... one of the few people I know that did not have a television, and did not seem to miss it. She contented herself with reading and writing... newspapers, devotional booklets, writing poems.... Quite the inner life! When asked how she was doing, she usually said: *“Doing the best I can with every day, and being grateful! “*

Yes, GRATITUDE is a key starting place for life in the spirit. With gratitude there is less complaining, grumbling, blaming...

Gratitude is relying on Grace during hard times, confident of receiving gracious blessings in the midst of all kinds of problems. Ann May had a relatively tough life; She was born in the big snowstorm of 1934, perhaps a harbinger of storms to come. It seemed to me like she had more than her share of heartbreak and LOSS, lost her husband at a relatively young age, lost one child to a plane crash, another fell prey to addiction, another had a debilitating cerebral stroke, and her fourth child, Jeff is here with us this morning.

Despite all her losses, Anna May kept the faith, especially the attitude of gratitude. Again, her continual saying, worth repeating, was: *I’m “Doing the best I can with each day,..... and being GRATEFUL!”* Here’s part of a poem about Gratitude for the Belleville community during time of sickness: *Thank you, thank you, oh my people! I have a pile of get well wishes and prayers as tall as the steeple! A more caring and sharing congregation just couldn’t be found; It certainly won’t be your fault if I don’t rebound.*

NATURE is of course a universal place that gratitude starts... awe for the beauty of the earth. Hear these words of our poet Anna May: *“Take time on your vacation and really stop and look! God is poetry in motion and the entire realm of nature are pages in His book!”* Just the other day, one of our Belleville friends who has experienced extreme poverty, sickness and homelessness, said how very “rich” he felt.. seeing new buds and blooms, on a sunny spring day! And he began to recite the song: “Who made the mountains, who made the trees, ... and who hung the moon and the stars in the sky? Somebody bigger than you or I.” Here’s part of another poem by Anna May that shows gratitude and awe for nature: *“There are Silver gems hidden in the snowflakes, and Gold glows in the sunsets which God makes. On a pleasant summer day, bright Azure in the sky, butterflies of every color gaily flutter by! There are Diamonds in the raindrops as they sparkle in the sun, and what about a rainbow to show the storm is done? Rich and poor together, God blesses everyone!*

In Christian community, there is a common focus on the deep nature of Christ’s love. As the letter of John says: “since God loved us so much, we ought to love one another.” Jesus emphasized sacrifice and service; he was a “servant leader.” Anna May was a leader in having a servant heart. As we have heard, she was always trying to meet others’ needs (I was amazed that even though she was carrying groceries home on a bus, she would get heavy six packs of water for me to use at the front lectern!) She knew there was always a gift that could be given, whether rich or poor, and she was a widow with very modest means and lifestyle. She alludes to economic diversity in God’s community, with these lines: *“If you haven’t got a penny, if you haven’t got a dime, there are riches from heaven that God sends all the time. Made in God’s image, see what God has done; rich and poor together, God blesses everyone!”*

Servant love is what Jesus preached and lived, even sacrificial love at times.... Here is part of a poem that shows Anna’s servant heart, willing to love even sacrificially: *We are called to share, and love is how we show we care! The steps of the cross are not easy to follow, there is plenty of misery, in which to wallow. But if everyone on earth had these three, Faith, Hope and Love, a better world would come to be! Jesus said “take up your cross and follow me;” this is the way to be set free!*

So many poems about love for God, and love for neighbor; about Hope, Love and Joy. And poems, like the Hebrew Psalms or Songs, are meant to be recited or sung OUT LOUD. When the Bible says “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” one meaning can be that Words of God and Christ are in our hearts, and at the tip of our tongues. So if you’ll pardon me, just a few more words from this poet who invited the words of God to dwell deep in her heart and be close to her tongue! These really should be made into a booklet... looking for a volunteer! Here’s one that I should save for next Christmas Eve: a part of her poem “Peace on Earth.” *All over the world people are marching; they are marching for peace; they are marching for war. We still haven’t learned, though we’ve been there before. All over the world people are hungry and people are sick, so many*

*lives have been hurt to the quick. A tear is a tear, all over the world, and war is a word that most people dread; a lasting peace would be much better instead... Jesus asked us to love on another; that makes everyone our sister or brother! Feed the hungry, heal the sick, clothe the naked and do it quick. Pray God will forgive our warring madness, and help us find peace that will end all sadness.*

Forward through the ages... move the faithful spirits... move the “Belleville Spirits.” With the community of John, let us say: “If we love one another, God lives in us, and God’s love is perfected in us.” I like those last words, that love is “perfected” in us, implying that we are all imperfect, striving to be better at love and peacemaking. One of Anna’s poems was actually an apology to a dear sister in our fellowship: *I hope this little rhyme will cause your heart to soften. I am sorry I offended you because you are one of my angels who reaches out to me so often. I only want friends, so if you won’t forgive me, my grief will never end. If you can, please forgive my erring ways; my only excuse is I was mixed up, in an unthinking daze, and now my dear angel, here’s the bottom line, “to err is human, but to forgive is just divine!”* Yes, a humble soul, willing to apologize, knowing the importance of grace, forgiveness, reconciliation in God’s kind of love. It’s a striving for deeper love in a “beloved community: a love that acknowledges human flaws, sin, error, mistakes, dysfunction, and lives in the forgiving grace of Christ. Sometimes we go two steps forward, one step back; we are all on the road to creating a more loving, more peaceful community, in the way of Jesus who was full of grace and truth, truth that may be hard to hear, but truth “spoken with Love.”

Let us always love with grace and with truth, following Jesus and some esteemed elders in our midst. And our spiritual practice often starts with that inner journey, the steadfast and humble posture of Gratitude, for the beauty of the earth, and for the gift of community! Here, with a tune, are Ann May’s sparkling words on the blessings of nature and community. I love this poem! (Ross sings Anna May’s poem “Silver Gems”).