



At A Distance - Wednesday, April 15, 2020

“Hot Sauce and Sweetgrass”

“Forget Toilet Paper... We’re Out of Hot Sauce!”

Greetings Saints and welcome to another wonderful Wednesday. It seems like catastrophes of all kinds - whether they are hurricanes, floods, volcanic eruptions, plane crashes, terrorist incidents or our latest assailant the COVID-19 virus - seem to bring out both the best and the worst in us. The fight or flight responses genetically coded in humans from the beginning of time, and triggered deep in our autonomic nervous systems, have served us well up to now. Whether we are about to be eaten by a woolly mammoth, a saber-tooth tiger, or now simply a viral and virulent bit of microscopic RNA protein looking for a home, our self-preservation instincts are alive, well and very, very telling.

Nothing shows the bright light of revelation into the deep and sometimes dark corners of our personal and societal priorities like a good catastrophe. And so, it is with me on this bright and beautiful Wednesday in Vancouver, Washington, as I share a deep and dark look into what is important to me. Hot Sauce.

Not just any hot sauce, but, in my never-to-be-humble opinion, the queen of all hot sauces, *Cholula Sweet Habanero Hot Sauce*. It goes on just about everything that lands on a plate at my place at the family table. And in the absence of this most necessary of condiments, life seems indeed bleak, almost unbearable. And so, here is my public confession. Yes, when possible I have Cholula Sweet Habanero Hot Sauce three deep in my pantry. I was a COVID hoarder. Not meat or bath tissue or eggs. My COVID-19 survival “trinity” included, Diet Coke, Keurig Coffee Pods

(sorry) and Cholula. Toilet paper is well down the list as I periodically cut our well read, and beloved Columbian newspaper into “Charmin-sized” squares. But yes, catastrophes shine the light on the things that temporarily we hold and see as important. When our fight or flight cellular mechanisms are in high gear and on red alert. But when we settle and think a bit more clearly with the rest of our brain, and heart and spirit; it is then that we often have that “*blinding flash of common sense*” that leads us back to a truer reality.

My “no hot sauce rant” this morning brought me around to some very serious thinking about what actually *is* important for me during this time of trial. And this introspective moment brought me back to two of the most powerful symbols that both inspire and comfort me. The Sweetgrass Braid and the Cradleboard.

Let’s talk about the Cradleboard first. For First Nations’ mothers and babies, the cradleboard is an amazing piece of traditional technology. Taking the place of backpack, stroller, swaddler and entertainment center for the blessed littles, they fill all of our babies’ needs. The Cradleboard keeps them warm, safe, dry, fed and feeling loved. *All of the priorities that we really need.* In many First Nations’ languages the word for “wrapped” and the word for “love” is the same word. I wrap you/I love you... you are swaddled, wrapped and tied tightly. Not to constrain but to support. Not to smother but to warmly embrace. And so, this morning, as I lamented my last drop of hot sauce, I realized that I already had everything that I needed, right there with my family.

Next, the Sweetgrass Braid. The Sweetgrass Braid is one of the original prayer tools given to First Nations people by Creator. Along with sage, cedar and tobacco, these Sacred Tools fill Medicine Bags and Smudge Bowls across the Indigenous world. The Sweetgrass Braid is crafted from three strong individual strands. Each of the strands are made from seven individual blades of Sweetgrass, symbolizing the seven Sacred Directions of the Medicine Wheel: East-Yellow; South-Red; West-Black; North-White; Up-Blue; Down-Green; Inside-Purple (The Great Mystery). These three strands of seven blades stand for Ourselves; Our Family; and Our Community. By braiding these three strands together: Self, Family and Community, we become strong, intensely strong, unbeatable. But when the individual strands stand alone, we are weak.

And so this morning it was good for me to remember the Lesson of The Sweetgrass Braid again. When I rely on myself alone, I am weak and vulnerable. When I care just about myself, I am weak and vulnerable as well. When I hoard rather than share. When I place my own comforts and needs in competition with, rather than in collaboration with the needs of my family and my community. But when I stand wrapped and entwined and interconnected intimately with my family and my community, then I... we... are unbeatable.

And so, on this wonderful Wednesday here in Vancouver, Washington as I browse Winco for some supplies, I am wrapped in the renewed, re-discovery of the Cradle Board. The realization that I already have everything that I need. I am warm, safe, dry, fed and loved. And as I walk through the aisles of my community market, face masked, but eyes shining and smiling, I place a single bottle of my prized hot sauce in my cart, as I embrace again the example and message of The Sweetgrass Braid... self, family and community weaved strong.

Blessings,

Father Joe