

Grace Episcopal Church

Elaine Taylor, Homily
August 23, 2020

Isaiah 51: 1-6
Psalm 138: 1-8
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16: 13-20

“If things don’t work out, you come back home.” Those were my grandfather’s words to my mother as she boarded the bus that would take her far from the farm lands of western Kentucky. She was 18 and headed to Detroit for a new life in the city. “If things don’t work out, you come back home.” In those nine words I think he meant “If the city doesn’t welcome your dreams, if it crushes them and you instead, if you can’t find work or do the work you find, if the person you love is lost to you, or you feel like a failure... you come back home.” She told me that story the last time when she was in her 80s and her eyes still filled with tears.

Emily suggested I talk today about what I’m learning during this strange period in our lives. That story has helped me find what to share with you. Like these global crises always do, this one has upended the world as we knew it. It’s shining a spotlight on our collective compassion and also our selfishness. The strength of our resilience and the strength of our resistance to change. It’s crushed a lot of our dreams, and a lot of us. It’s a time to look for where we can find the strength going home can give as we rebuild our lives and communities.

These last few months have exposed some pretty deep fractures and inequities in the structures we’ve built over the centuries and I suspect we all know, deep down, that going back to what was normal isn’t really an option. We need to find a way to go forward...transformed so we don’t just recreate the old brokenness. As Christians we shouldn’t be at all surprised by that. God certainly isn’t. I think God is always saying something like, “If, or when, things don’t work out, you come back home.”

Emily has been inviting us all to join her in a new study that can help us find a new way forward, at least in one area. And since how we do one thing is usually how we do most things, maybe we can grow thru her study...Becoming Beloved Community..., in ways that will carry over into the rest of our lives. And while the study’s particular focus is racial reconciliation, the transformation needed to become Beloved Community without racial barriers is the same transformation we need to become a Beloved Community, period. And I’ll propose it starts with the willingness to see ourselves with honesty and a willingness to be changed by what we see, whatever that means going forward.

I firmly believe being able to see the truth about ourselves is an incredible grace and gift! It’s the only chance we have to be free of the terrible burden of defending what we know is no longer defensible. And it’s the best chance we have of becoming a community that we, and more importantly, others, can come home to as we learn the way of love, not the way of fear and all its tyrannical cousins.

In one short paragraph today, we heard of Peter whose eyes were opened by God to see who Jesus really was, and it forever changed his world and his future. Talk about transformation! But during the last few months I've thought a lot about one big impediment standing in the way of the transformation we yearn for...and of our becoming that Beloved Community. I want to take a risk this morning and name it: We are not a people who know how to say, "I was wrong." Not most of us. We're quick to say "That was wrong...they were wrong...you were wrong." But, "I was wrong?" Oooo. That's hard. But I believe it's the eye of the needle we need to pass through if we have any hope of coming out of this season better than we entered it.

It's hard to do under the best of circumstances, but in our hyper-critical, character assassinating, cancel-culture today, it's even harder. It takes so much courage to admit "I was wrong" when I acted or thought a certain way. To say, "I helped break this, didn't I?" or "I, and people like me, benefited at your expense, didn't we?" Those sins against God...and our neighbor...by what we have done and by what we have left undone. The good and the not so good in us is all tangled up together like an old ball of twine we wish we could just stuff back in the drawer and buy a new one. But we can't...because it's us...so we watch more Netflix, eat more cookies and give thanks for the good excuse to just stay home and not see anybody!

I firmly believe we only trust we're loved to the degree we're not hiding who we really are. Let me repeat that. That said, we can give God's Beloved Community a chance to grow if just one of us...just one, comes clean that we aren't always the loving people we want others to think we are...that WE want to think we are. And then maybe another will find the courage to do the same. And another, and another.

So, how do we learn to be better at that? Where do we find the courage for that kind of honesty? And how do we make it easier for one another to find that courage, too? As with most things, we get better with practice and we learn from our mistakes. We can start in small ways. Be the one who can laugh tenderly at your own humanity in your bloopers moments. Those people are so freeing to be around. Or when you're ready to be a little bolder, try this. If something comes to mind during the Confession we'll say in a few minutes, tell your spouse on the way home, or a merciful friend in the next few days. Or if you find you're carrying a "biggy," you may want to bring it to Emily. There is a wonderful liturgy for just that. Whatever it looks like for each of us, I'm reminded of the quote, "Sometimes we have to be the change we want to see."

I'd be remiss if I didn't add one more thing. Most of us also need to learn how to be better listeners in these moments and not give in to the temptation to minimize the other's fault or to attack them for it. Saying something like, "Well, it's about time you admitted that!" isn't really very helpful. This process is way too big for a homily, I know, but it can be a starting place if this is somewhat uncharted territory for us.

You know, it's not just the Beloved Community study that encourages all this. It's the pattern throughout the scriptures. Falling, admitting we fell, coming home to God and one another

where we find “grace and mercy to help in time of need,” and rising again, changed a little bit more for the falling. You know the scripture in James, “Confess your faults one to another and be healed?” I can’t explain why, but saying, “I was wrong...” to another human being opens something up, and heals something, and frees something- both inside of us and between us as people. If we the church can’t lead the way in this, who can? The more our culture cancels people for a wrong and denies them the hope of change, the more we need to practice the opposite. Starting right here, with me, with you...with us.

We pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We may not think about it, but in that prayer we are asking to be transformed into a people where humility and truth and love make us home- family- to one another on this earth. Where each of us can find our footing again when “things don’t work out.” Where no pretense is needed. Where Love shines like the warm sunlight, and Mercy triumphs over judgment. God’s Beloved Community.

In my experience, I’ve seen that taste of the kingdom most clearly in the black community and it’s taught me a great deal. I want to end by shared just one of those moments. A woman named Joanne came to one of our African-American family history sessions up in Louisa hoping for help to locate her mother’s family. She was in her late 50s and had been raised in the foster care system after her mother couldn’t care for her. Her mother had long since passed away, but not Joanne’s longing to know who she came from. She had learned her mother’s name and a bit about her family. But she couldn’t find any of them. A month or so later, we did another session at the public library and a woman from Richmond was there, maybe in her early 40s. As she shared who she was looking for, we realized she was part of Joanne’s missing family and helped them arrange to meet at the museum during our next research session.

Joanne arrived a half hour early that day so I sat with her in the research room and chatted. “So, how are you on your big day today?” I asked. She told me she was so nervous she hadn’t slept at all the night before. Shortly, others began arriving, including the woman from Richmond... and her aunt, one of those older women who seem to carry all the wisdom in the world inside them. When they were introduced, the younger woman reached out her arms to Joanne and embraced her, and didn’t let her go. Joanne began to cry. And then cry some more. Tears that had waited a lifetime. I stepped back and fell silent, knowing we were on holy ground. Then the older woman, with the tenderness that only comes from living a long time in a broken world, and welcoming broken people home, started rubbing Joanne’s back as she said, “It’s alright baby. You go ahead and cry. You got people now. You got people.”

Thanks be to God. Amen