**Love and Power** Rev. Phillip J. Romine
Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
John 6:35, 41-51 Saint Paul, Minnesota
August 11, 2024

I begin today where I ended a few weeks ago with Walter Brueggemann’s advice, “Don't go left. Don’t go right. Go deeper,”

Going deeper has always the Christian calling; it is a calling that is stimulating, perplexing, ambitious, and daring. And these, by the way, are synonyms for chaos. Chaos is one of the words we use to translate *tehom* from the HebrewIt is also known as “The Deeps” and equated with “laying waste to” or entering into the wilderness. In the words of Catherine Keller, “It is [facing] not *ex-nihilo*, not nothing, but a whole lot of not-quite-somethingness.” She suggests we think about it as the “*creatio continua*–the open-ended process of a living planet as well as the “ongoing process of creating a just, compassionate, and sustainable world” (*The Face of the Deep*).

Going deeper recognizes the expansive work of discipleship and  embraces the complexity, confusion, and disarray of being human. Most of us fear The Deeps of because it brings to mind a loss of control, feeling too much, being stretched too thin, and certainly the abandonment of death.

Today I am going to refer to this fear response as our inner toddler. In my very first church office, I found one piece of paper left behind in the file cabinet and it contained these toddler rules:

If I like it, it’s mine.

If it’s in my hand, it’s mine.

If I can take it from you, it’s mine.

If it’s mine, it must NEVER appear to be yours in any way.

If I’m doing or building something, all the pieces are mine.

If it looks like mine, it is mine.

If I saw it first, it’s mine.

If you are playing with something and you put it down, it automatically becomes mine.

If it’s broken, it’s yours.

Toddlers live with all their emotions on their sleeve. The beauty and wonder of it is that they can sense pain or fear in others and respond with exemplary tenderness and amazing loving kindness. And, then, at times, they don’t want to do what they don’t want to do and it brings the pout, the tantrum, and the tumult of emotions. Today, we have the introspective Psalmist contrasted with the inner toddler represented by those who confront Jesus with complaints and unbelief.

Psalm 130 is one of the Psalms of Assent meaning; it is thought that these words were sung thousands of years ago, as our ancestors in faith walked up the Temple Mount. These could also be words shared by groups making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The Psalmist and those singing his words, break from the chaos of human emotion to praise God. The Psalms tell us over and over again that there is no shame in bringing our feelings, concerns, and foibles before God. Of course being seen by God prompts honest self-evaluation and repentance which are a part of the invitation to growth. God is the loving parent constantly inviting growth and maturity. We tend to continue on our own but the Psalmist suggests we wait.

I find our culture is not interested in waiting and watching. It feels like patience was drained away in the pandemic. Waiting is a concept that is counter to something like Amazon Prime. It’s in opposition to “Let me just Google that.”. But spiritually, waiting challenges old practices and routines. And, waiting, in the religious sense, does not necessarily mean inaction. Waiting can be an important time in which we collect our thoughts, sort our feelings, tend to our pains, and gather our hopes. Waiting is an opportunity to empty out old expectations to make room for the new.

Waiting is behind the spiritual practice of fasting. I had a friend in seminary who fasted every Wednesday morning so that our weekly communion bread would be her first meal of the day. It is a beautiful, faithful practice. I would add that this worked for her in her 40s, it wasn’t healthy for her in her 60s, so fasting has to be done in a healthy way and it’s not for everyone. But it is a meaningful practice for strengthening faith. Fasting from electronics is something we can do at any age. Waiting allows life to unfold and eases us into change and new life.

Given that this is a Psalm of pilgrims, I would also like to say a few words about pilgrimage as a spiritual practice. It can be done alone or with a group. It may or may not involve leaving home because it is about intention and paying attention; it can be a day’s walk or a three-month retreat. For the Hebrews in todays’ scripture it was a vertical pre-worship walk in anticipation and celebration of God. In Medieval times, a pilgrimage was often a practice of penitence which often meant visiting holy relics, shrines, or places of healing.

In the Hebrew, to be a pilgrim meant to be a stranger or foreigner in need of hospitality. It was translated into the Latin as *peregrini*, adding the connotations of someone on a journey or a temporary resident.

In our time, people of all ages and particularly young adults are flocking to the El Camino in northern Spain. Walking the Camino may or may not be a religious journey but I think most would say it is a spiritual journey by way of beauty, quiet, and the physical labor. During Covid-19, a group of us did a virtual Camino pilgrimage–one of the most memorable and meaningful pandemic experiences for me.

All of this put me in mind of a ponderance shared by former seminary president and pastor Stephen Ray this week. He wrote:

“The Nones about whom so much was written more than a decade ago are coming into their thirties. They are forming families, settling into employment patterns and geographies. [I] Wonder what folks who gave up on them as possible future for the Church are thinking these days.”

I’m thinking that hosting and sharing spiritual practices are the future; sharing sacred space and acknowledging every person’s spiritual journey is the future. This sanctuary is a pilgrimage in and of itself. Our building and campus, when opened and shared, can be sanctuary, can be safe and sacred space for all who seek to go deeper and for those in waiting. And then, as Parker Palmer says, “The spiritual life teaches wholeness, integration with all being, and out of that wholeness comes true power and action.”

Which brings me to these words from Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King from 1967:
*"You see, what happened is that some of our philosophers got off base. And one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as … polar opposites, so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love. It was this misinterpretation that caused the philosopher Nietzsche, who was a philosopher of the will to power, to reject the Christian concept of love. It was this same misinterpretation which induced Christian theologians to reject Nietzsche's philosophy of the will to power in the name of the Christian idea of love.

Now, we got to get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love. And this is what we must see as we move on."*

“Love correcting everything that stands against love”–this is the pilgrimage. This is the work of going deeper.

In our reading from John, Jesus takes on the identity of Bread, one of the most diverse and universal and also, most ordinary and humble foods on the planet. In the small taste of bread and juice in our communion, we remind ourselves that Jesus is with us and sustains us on the journey of miles and years. The bread we break and the cup we share keep calling us forward into new ministries of hospitality with the reminder today to leave no generation behind! As one commentator wrote, “When Jesus says, ‘I am the bread from heaven,’ the discussion should move from what Moses did in the past to what God is doing in the present” (The Working Preacher).

In the John text, Jesus refers back to the prophets as well as his own teachings TO, in the words of Palmer, “give voice to the living experience of God against the dead forms of their times” Palmer is echoing Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s belief that it is easy to become addicted “to inauthentic forms of faith” and that we must constantly seek for “the one, true, and living God” (“In the Belly of a Paradox”). The next generations need us to welcome them as pilgrims. There are many places to stay along the Camino but most famous are the *refugios* or hostels. The are basic, inexpensive and have no strings attached–we who can and want to give and tithe are creating this Presbyterian refugio for generations to come, these are our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren and the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren of our neighbors who may not yet know how much they need a spiritual home. Providing for a future we cannot yet see is going deeper.

Coming to this place virtually and in person makes us all pilgrims on a faith journey. Heaven only knows what some of you have been preparing and eating when celebrating communion virtually! (I hope someone had wine and croissant!) As a congregation, we have been in an incredibly long walk through one transition after another, with a world-wide pandemic and major construction project thrown in to boot. We have been waiting and watching for the sunrise/Son Rise! It has not been a passive time but one in which we have envisioned a future and begun moving toward it. We are in the final leg of our interim ministry and soon to live into our own faith and hope as well as God’s preferred future for us.

In these coming months, remember,

as Catherine Keller wrote, “it’s not nothing, but a whole lot of not-quite-somethingness” that we have been in the midst of; a *creatio continua*–an open-ended and life-givine process …

Remember,

that, we must care for our inner toddlers and whatever is hurting within and love one another into maturity in this faith …

Remember,

that our souls are leading us through the paradox that we are, at one and the same time, waiting for the Lord and watching for the morning even as we know the Triune God is present with us …

And as we claim these challenging years of transition, let us also claim our hard-won wisdom and the powerful companionship of this community. And then let go forward as pilgrims welcoming other pilgrims and seekers; and as those who use love to “correct everything that stands against love.”

May God make it so. Amen.