

May 10th, 2020 sermon

We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond.

- Gwendolyn Brooks –

What makes you feel brave? Is it possible to be brave and still maintain vulnerability? I have seen evidence of great bravery this week, I have witnessed great vulnerability alongside great bravery and it gives me hope that not only can vulnerability accompany bravery, but in order for love to flourish vulnerability must accompany bravery.

These days, in our house, we often find ourselves competing for physical space in which to hold virtual meetings on various devices. Therefore, it is sometimes impossible not to overhear what each person in the house is working on and working out.

My wife Katie is a public-school teacher, serving kindergarten through second grade children with special needs. And here is a shout out to any and all teachers figuring out how to lead a classroom through school shut downs, a public health crisis, and virtual learning- you deserve a medal of honor, or a bonus, or at least a whole lot of respect!

This week, with the help of a translator, Katie was on the phone with one of her students. As part of her new weekly protocol, she also checks in with each students' parents. In one particular family, both parents are working full time packaging premade meals for a factory supplying food to local stores. Mom reported that she chops vegetables from early morning until late in the afternoon each day. When she gets home, she is exhausted and the last thing she wants to do is make dinner or help her six-year-old twins and twelve-year-old son with their homework.

It was vulnerable for this mother to tell her daughter's teacher that her only wish was that school would reopen. She broke down when asking if someone could come and take her kids for a long walk when she got home from work, so that she could rest for a bit. Every day, devoted parents get up, feed the kids, go to work, do the homework, give the bath, engage the playtime or extracurricular project, and collapse into bed only to do it all again the next day. For this family and thousands like them, there is no respite in sight; no summer school or camps until maybe early August.

Where does their strength come from I wonder, what sources that kind of bravery and vulnerability? Does it come from God? What kind of God allows for such struggle in the name of love?

Some years back Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a book called, God in Pain: Teaching sermons on suffering. In it I found this quote:

“Disillusioned, we find out that God does not conform to our expectations. We glimpse our own relative size in the universe and see that no human being can say who God should be or how God should act. We review our requirements of God and recognize them as our own fictions, things we tell ourselves to make ourselves feel safe or good or comfortable.

Disillusioned, we find out what is not true and we are set free to seek what is—if we dare—to turn away from the God who was supposed to be in order to seek the God who is.”

Very dear friends of ours, whom many of you have met, Kate, Jeanne and their daughter Julia live in Oakland right off the Keller exit on the 580 freeway. Julia comes to Camp Caz every year so many of you know her that way, Kate and Jeanne come to church sometimes too. Our families met before the girls were born and have been fast friends ever since. We have watched Julia grow up alongside our daughter Ellie the girls are five months apart. Julia is passionate, artistic, deeply spiritual and very insightful. There is also a fierceness to Julia, sometimes that looks like stubborn, but mostly it looks like inner resolve. She was born with that trait, although I think it is safe to say that growing up in a loving household has encouraged her to hone in on it, express it and thank God this week act on it.

It was a sunny Monday afternoon and Julia was on her bed engaged in a zoom meeting with her classmates when she heard two men burst through the front door and into to the living room—one of the men was armed. They were fleeing a drug deal gone wrong and being chased by three other assailants. It quickly became clear to Kate that these were young guys in a heap load of trouble. They were frightened and looking for cover more than looking hurt anyone. One man squeezed himself into the coat closet while the other headed for Julia’s bedroom. Our fierce young one slammed the door and braced herself against it. He pushed and pushed but she held her ground. Before long the coast had cleared and the two men ran on. Later Julia told her mother what she had said to them as they ran down the street; “Be safe and God bless you.”

Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-16

**In you, O God,
I seek refuge;**

do not let me ever be
put to shame;
in your righteousness
deliver me.

**Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily.
Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.**

**You are indeed my rock
and my fortress;
for your name's sake
lead me and guide me,**

take me out of the net
that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.

Into your hand I commit
my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O God,
O faithful God.

My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand
of my enemies and persecutors.

**Let your face shine
upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.**

My experience of this past two months is that grief and disaster brings out the best in some people and the worst in others. Jennifer Grey who runs the disaster relief group Rebuild Northbay, said in the first week of the shut-down that in responding to crisis there are three kinds of people to watch for; people who need help, people who want to help, and people who will take advantage of the situation.

“For those willing to keep heaving themselves toward the light, things can change. What has been lost gradually becomes less important than what is to be found. Curiosity pokes its green head up through the asphalt of grief, and fear of the unknown takes on an element of wonder as the disillusioned turn away from the God who was supposed to be in order to seek the God who is. Every letdown becomes a lesson and a lure. Did God fail to come when I called? Then perhaps God is not a minion. So who is God? Did God

fail to punish my adversary? Then perhaps God is not a policeman. So who is God? Did God fail to make everything turn out all right? Then perhaps God is not a fixer. So who is God? Over and over, my disappointments draw me deeper into the mystery of God's being and doing. Every time God declines to meet my expectations, another of my idols is exposed."

— **Barbara Brown Taylor, Preaching Life**

I am now and will perpetually be perplexed by that instinct to take advantage of others when the chips are down, the only assurance I can offer is that there are far fewer of those folks than there are people who are stepping up and stepping in to cooperate, share and sacrifice.

It occurs to me that both those who need help and those who want to help have some deep and important commonality. Both roles require a certain kind of willingness to be vulnerability, and both roles require a certain kind of bravery. When we see love being exchanged in these situations it is because both bravery and vulnerability are present perhaps that is the face of God in this pandemic.

We all have good days and bad days on this emotional roller coaster that is playing out all around us. May we continue to notice the presence of God in our midst. No matter who we are or what adversities we are up against, may God's face shine ever upon us and cradle us in steadfast love as we seek to be the hands and feet of love in this hurting and wonderful world.

Amen