

April 30, 2020

The stones over which we stumble can be made into altars.
(Marie Howe)

Dear Trinity Family:

Here we are in week seven (?) of pandemic. If you've been tracking Trinity these past weeks (Sunday Zoom Church, Adult Forum, Rector Letters, Thursday Update) then you'll know that we have claimed this time of isolation, quarantine, separation, and distancing as "liminal space" – an in-between time where the old world, the way things have always been, has ceased to exist, and a new order, a new way, a new reality has not yet revealed itself. Here we stand between the "now" and the "not yet."

Liminal space is fraught with uncertainty, instability, and the fear of an unknown future. At best, we're uncomfortable. For most of us, our natural impulse is to avoid, distract, and then fill up this space rather than to sit with its emptiness, to face into the void, to simply stay with the disorientation of not knowing what the immediate or long-term future holds, if we and those we love will be okay.

What we're saying at Trinity about liminal space is this: resist the impulse to deny it. Live into it. The problems and hardships, the fear and anxiety over which we now stumble can, with our attention and intention, be holy and sacramental. Theologian Richard Rohr claims that within and during liminal space lives spiritual richness and a connectivity to God unlike any other time. Specifically, it's in liminal space that God reveals spiritual truths if we are open to receiving them and not too busy avoiding them. Rohr characterizes five spiritual messages of liminal space:

- 1) Life is hard.
- 2) You are not that important.
- 3) Your life is not all about you.
- 4) You are not in control.
- 5) You are going to die.

Each week of Eastertide, we've been taking a deeper look into one of the five messages. Last week: "Life is hard." This week: "You are not in control."

There have been three times in my life where I felt completely, totally, and desperately out of control. The first time was in 1989 when my younger brother Justin was hit by a car on his college campus (Rhode Island School of Design). He suffered a traumatic brain injury, was on life-support for weeks, and in the hospital for years. As a family we sat for an eternity in a cramped, windowless ICU waiting room in Providence Hospital, surrounded by other panic-ridden families, waiting, hanging on every, single word a nurse or doctor or intern muttered to us. There was nothing we could do. Nothing. And so we prayed. Over the course of the night, my Mom read the entire psalter aloud to my brother. Friends would come by with the Eucharist, our altar my brother's bed, next to his motionless body. There was nothing we could do. Nothing. I was a young adult then, fresh out of college, in the first year of my professional life in Washington DC. It was a cruel and harsh lesson about control, and the lack thereof, for so young a person. It formed me.

The second and third time I experienced the full impact of being out of control was in giving birth to my two children. Once in a while Michael and I pull out the birth plan we so carefully crafted while pregnant with our first child, and we laugh. “I’d like ice chips every 30 minutes,” it reads. “I’ll eat XX for dinner as my last meal before hard labor, and for music I’d like XX.” It’s so funny. Suffice to say, that is not how things went down. What I remember most from both experiences is that there was little I could do. It was happening whether I liked it or not, and it was happening in its own way. My cognitive thought, my will, and my ego were not in control. My body was in control. It knew what to do as it took its cues not from my birth plan, but from some ancient and primordial map, God’s creation that laid the design for biology and reproduction before the earth was formed. I was not in control. There was nothing I could do to control it.

For me, the spiritual truth of “you are not in control” is something I have to learn over and over again, liminal space or no liminal space. I have my memory of liminal experiences of critical injury, the threat of death, and the miracle of birth upon which to draw. I remember what those liminal experiences felt like, how desperate, how disorienting. I remember how I initially, stupidly, attempted to assert myself over the situations, attempted to “do things” to change reality. And how I, eventually, came to realize that I just wasn’t in control, and had to put my trust in God. Entirely. But I forget and lose the wisdom gleaned from those experiences in the day to day.

As Richard Rohr writes, “We are, clearly, not in control, as this pandemic is now teaching the whole planet. It is amazing that we need to assert the obvious. Learning that we are not in control situates us correctly in the universe. If we are to feel at home in this world, we have to come to know that we are not steering the ship....For many of us, this may be the first time in our lives that we have felt so little control over our own destiny and the destiny of those we love. This lack of control initially feels like a loss, a humiliation, a stepping backward, an undesired vulnerability. However, recognizing our lack of control is a universal starting point for a serious spiritual walk towards wisdom and truth.”

In my prayer time this week the word that keeps coming up for me is: *surrender*. Maybe part of coming to terms with how completely we are not in control is to begin to let down our resistance to its truth. There is an opening that happens when we lower our resistance. And into that opening, I believe, enters God. As the old Hasidic saying goes: “Where is God? Wherever you let God in.” Maybe coming to terms with “You are not in control” is a process of swapping out denial for openness, a “no” for a “yes,” resistance for trust in God. In this time of pandemic our defenses are up – we batten down the hatches, keep our distance, protect our own. But spiritually, the call is to lower the emotional defense, put down the drawbridge, lay down the burden, the illusion, of control. The spiritual work is an opening and a surrendering. We are not in control. We have nothing and everything. Our souls, in silence, wait.

What’s Helping Me Right Now

Tonight my family begins its home retrospective of Wes Anderson films (*Rushmore*, *Isle of Dogs*, *The Fantastic Mr. Fox*, *Moonrise Kingdom*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*). We’ll begin with our favorite, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, featured this past week in a New York Times article entitled, “Films to Help a Broken Moment.” All of Anderson’s films concern broken people and broken moments: a student looking for meaning and self, a boy searching for his dog, children looking for understanding or a home or a parent, wild animals searching for food and safety outsmarting farmers, a hotel manager pining for the glory days. In every Wes Anderson film, there’s some plot of loss and longing, searching for something or someone, and, in the mix, folly and quirk, glib one-liners, and unlikely bedfellows. And, in the end, they are all about healing.

I can hardly believe that we have lived in our Minneapolis neighborhood long enough to become the block's "old people." We are surrounded by young families, and it's a particular joy during pandemic to hear them in their driveways in late afternoons, screaming and playing. Our neighbors to the south have two little ones: five and three. Each week I dig out some of my kids' old toys: knee hockey sets, tunnels and playhouses, art projects, games, Hot Wheels and tracks -- and leave it on their porch. The little ones call it "Toy Library." They receive the next installment only after returning the previous week's bin. It makes me so happy.

Blessing

Your blessing this week comes from a poem about a turtle, because in our present moment, as we learn the deeper spiritual truths this liminal time has to teach us, we are like laborious turtles, our "only levity [found in] patience." We plod through this time, alone and together, graceful and graceless, toward a new way, a new world that we do not direct nor control. It is methodical, unglamorous spiritual work. But it gives us hope. "In all of our nights," prays the poet Padraig O Tuama, "turn us towards hope, because hope might just keep us alive." Amen.

Who would be a turtle who could help it?
A barely mobile hard roll, a four-oared helmet,
she can ill afford the chances she must take
in rowing toward the grasses that she eats.
Her track is graceless, like dragging
a packing-case places, and almost any slope
defeats her modest hopes. Even being practical,
she's often stuck up to the axle on her way
to something edible. With everything optimal
she skirts the ditch which would convert
her shell into a serving dish. She lives
below luck-level, never imagining some lottery
will change her load of pottery to wings.
Her only levity is patience,
the sport of truly chastened things.

("Turtle" by Kay Ryan from *Flamingo Watching*. © Copper Beech Press, 1994.)

May God's Peace be yours, today and always.
Devon