

April 2, 2020

Dear Trinity Family:

I have been working with the senior high youth group to finish our station for the Stations of the Cross Good Friday service. Back when youth group was still meeting in person, we read through the stations that had not yet been selected and together chose Station #14 (the last one): Jesus is Laid in the Tomb. The reading for the station is from Mark 15:46 – “Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.”

The youth group then plunged into a bible study of the verses on both sides of Mark 15:46. Together we talked about *why* – *why* Joseph of Arimathea (a different Joseph than the Joseph married to Jesus’ mother Mary) would take the big risks he took – after Jesus died on the cross, Joseph asked the authorities if he might have Jesus’ body. He then took Jesus down from the cross, prepared his body for burial according to religious custom, purchased a tomb and placed Jesus there, rolling the stone against the opening. *Why* would he do all of that?

No surprise, our senior high youth are smart and perceptive. Some thought that Joseph must have felt responsible and guilty and terrible that he could do nothing to prevent Jesus’ torturous demise at the hand of Pontius Pilot, and he took risks in order to try to compensate, to show his love and faithfulness in some real, tangible way. Others thought that Joseph was attempting to finish the story, that in the narrative about Jesus that would be shared far and wide would be this beautiful ending (Joseph didn’t know about the resurrection that was about to happen). Another person was reminded that Jesus lived in an occupied land. The Romans controlled Jerusalem and the surrounding provinces with a cruel and steely grip. And one thing colonizers throughout history have always done: sought to strip the colonized of their culture, religious practices, and dignity. It just might be, our youth thought, that Joseph’s actions were expressions of resistance, by attempting to restore to Jesus what the Romans had taken away from him: culture, religious rituals and practices (like, a Jewish burial), and the dignity that had been literally stripped from him in the sickening and humiliating events of the crucifixion.

We then dug a little deeper. Like most biblical actors, a bit of a cult following sprang up in early Christianity around Joseph of Arimathea. It is believed that after Jesus’ death and resurrection Joseph traveled to England to spread the Gospel. Legend has it that Joseph took with him the Holy Grail and his pilgrim’s staff. When he arrived in England he made his way to Glastonbury, and upon arrival stuck his pilgrim’s staff into the ground. Overnight the staff turned into a flowering thorn tree where it remains to this day.

Our Station #14 is a black canvas with a tomb in the middle. All around the blackness are replicas of the flower that adorns the Glastonbury Thorn tree. Our idea: that even in the bleakest, most hopeless, darkest situations in life, there is beauty, meaning, compassion, and healing. We must learn to trust the darkness, knowing that God is there with us. The flowers represent kindness and hope in the midst of despair.

Last week in his Op-Ed entitled, “The Moral Meaning of the Plague,” David Brooks quoted Viktor Frankl. “...writing from the madness of the Holocaust, [Frankl] reminded us that we don’t get to choose our difficulties, but we do have the freedom to select our responses. Meaning, he argued, comes from three things: the work we offer in times of crisis, the love we give, and our ability to display courage in the face of suffering. The menace may be subhuman or superhuman, but we all have the option of asserting our own dignity, even to the end.”

Brooks goes on to assert that COVID-19 (which he refers to as the plague) is an “invisible monster,” but he believes it gives birth to a better world. Now, more than ever, the fundamental moral questions apply and demands that we as a nation address our problems in ways we weren’t forced to before. “The plague brings forth our creativity. It’s during economic and social depressions that the great organizations of the future are spawned.” I commend Brook’s whole column to you: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/opinion/coronavirus-meaning.html>

Suffering through uncertainty, anxiety, and fear can be redemptive. I think we learn more about who we are, what we trust, and who we want to be. Perhaps our stronger, better selves--- selves more faithful and more aware of the extent to which we live, entirely, at the mercy of God-- might emerge on the other side of this horror. To me that’s such an encouraging idea. How will we infuse this time with meaning, knowing that we have the power to choose our responses? How will we invoke our inner Joseph of Arimatheas, taking the risk to be better people when the stakes are the highest?

What is Helping Me Cope

This week the award goes to, again, Tara Brach. Here is a 20-minute guided meditation for times of pandemic that I have listened to four times: <https://www.tarabrach.com/meditation-times-of-pandemic/>

I have also been listening to our Presiding Bishop, my friend Michael Curry. Each week Bishop Curry posts a video postcard, inviting the church into a particular “Habit of Grace.” This week, while reading Matthew 22, he realized that Jesus has something very specific to say to those of us living in unsteady and uncertain times:

<https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/pressreleases/habits-of-grace-love-god-love-your-neighbor-love-yourself/>

Blessing

Our Book of Common Prayer is a work of art. Many of the prayers inside it are hundreds, even a thousand, years old. And yet – they are ever relevant, ever urgent. Your blessing this week comes from the Prayer for Self-Dedication (BCP, pp.832-3).

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Until next week, may God’s Peace be yours, this day and always. Devon