

May 7, 2020

Dear Trinity family:

There was a woman whose young son was taken by a sudden illness and died. The woman bundled him in warm blankets and, crazed with grief, stumbled from house to house, begging for medicine that would bring him back to life.

She traveled to the next town to see the Buddha, crying, "Please, my son needs your medicine!" As she stood before him, he observed the child's lifeless face. "You did well in coming here for medicine," the Buddha comforted her. "Here you will find the help you need. But first, before I can save your child, you must do something for me. You must return to the city from which you just came. There, find me a single mustard seed and bring it back. Most important of all," he said, "the mustard seed must be from a family in which no one has died. Go now, make the rounds of the city and ask at every home."

The woman hurried back to her city. At the very first house she stopped and knocked at the door. An old woman answered. She easily gave the woman a mustard seed – all India used them in cooking. But the woman remembered Buddha's further instructions. "Tell me," she said, "I must ask you, if anyone has died in this family recently?" The old woman's head lowered and she fell silent. When she raised her face a pool of tears were in her eyes. "I'm sorry to say the answer is yes," the old woman replied, "My dear husband died six months ago." "I am so sorry," said the woman. "Thank you for your kindness, but I cannot take this mustard seed."

And so it went, house after house after house. "We cannot help you," was the repeated reply. Always, someone had lost a beloved – a brother or a sister, a grandparent, an aunt or cousin, a mother or father. The list grew longer and longer. After a time, nightfall came. The woman gazed down at her son in her arms. Studying him closely, she felt a gradual change in herself. Not a single household she had visited that day lived untouched by death's sad hand. Many suffered just as she did now. She was not alone. And somehow, with these thoughts, her grief lightened just a bit. She returned home and readied her son for his funeral.

After the burial she returned to the monastery to speak with the Buddha. "I am done looking for the mustard seed," she said. "I know that in the whole city, in the whole world, there is not one family, not one person, free from the certainty of death. It is the way of all living things... There are many others who have lost what they most cherished. We must help each other, as you have helped me."

It is said that she never left the Buddha after her return to the monastery. And that from her experience, she was able to comfort many, many others in her lifetime.

Despite what we might think, very little of our pain and suffering is unique to ourselves. When we're in the midst of anguish or challenge it certainly feels like our struggle is the only struggle, that our circumstance is the only circumstance of its kind. It certainly can feel that we are the only one – exceptional and matchless in our pain. But as the Buddha gently taught the grieving

woman – we are not as special, singular, or even as important as we think. Each of us is one of many, just one star in a vast galaxy. The virtue of the woman’s experience came in both her understanding of that truth, and also in her subsequent transformation. From her awakening, she grew into the fullness of herself as a comforter, a minister of compassion. Her transformation came when she stopped seeing herself as singular and unique and special, and placed herself in right perspective – as one person living her life *with*, in connection to, a world full of other people. One of countless many.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu calls this right perspective “ubuntu” – the South African concept which means “I am because you are.” It’s the idea that being a single person is not what life is about, or at least not the spiritual life. What life in God is about is life lived in relationship to and with others. The richness of life comes from situating ourselves as part of a community, in relationships, understanding ourselves as one small part of an intricate, complicated web of humanity. We are but one star in the galaxy. We help make up the galaxy but an infinitesimal piece of it. No one of us is the galaxy itself.

You will recall that we at Trinity have claimed this time of pandemic as “liminal time” – a temporal space in which the old reality as we knew it pre-pandemic has faded away, but the new reality has not yet come into view. We’re living in in-between space, which is neither comfortable nor desired. And yet – it is a rich, provocative spiritual moment. Theologian Richard Rohr claims that God works wonders in liminal space, if we’re open. In liminal space very specific essential God-messages come into view:

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

We’ve delved into “life is hard,” and “you are not in control” in past weeks. This week we turn to “you are not that important,” -- a spiritual truth both sharp and subtle. Or, less biting, we are just one tiny part of a vast and extensive humanity. When we shift out of ourselves as the perceived center of the universe and relocate our lives more accurately, more spiritually, in the enormity of creation it breaks open some spiritual resources for us, particularly in this time of crisis and pandemic. For starters, at least for me, the shift evokes a sense of humility. My little worries are just that – little. Conflicts, work-related entanglements, wider church politics, sadnesses, disappointments – in the grand scheme of things -- are just little and inconsequential. What is most essential in a “you are just not that important” spiritual mentality is relationship, connection to and with those around us, and beyond. The spiritual work of getting down deep into this liminal hard spiritual truth is: what is the quality of my relationship and connection to others? And, how do I see myself as interconnected with humanity, beyond my family, circle of friends, acquaintances, and professional colleagues? How do I give thanks to God for blessings bestowed on people I do not know, who are different from me, who live in the next town or on the other side of the globe? How do I pray for them, and dedicate my life to their wellbeing and the healing of the world?

The other discovery, I'm finding, in living into the hard, spiritual truth of "you are just not that important" is the greatness of God. Imagine – we are each just one tiny thread in the expansive patchwork of life, and yet – God has been with us from before our beginning, knows every hair on our head, is closer to us than our own breath, bears our every burden, holds our every desire, ministers to our every vulnerability. Our God is an intimate God, which blows my mind. How this is possible is the Mystery of which we so often speak. How God can hold it all, know it all, love it all, create it all is beyond our comprehension. But as we are reminded in Proverbs 9:10: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." (In Hebrew the word for "fear" is the same word for "awe" – so, if it works better for you: "The awe of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.") Coming to terms with "you are just not that important" starts us down the path of wisdom and deeper life.

Just like all of the other hard, spiritual truths of liminal space, "you are just not that important" requires a letting go. In this case, a letting go of self-centeredness, self-importance, a sense of our exceptional-ness. The great poet Rilke once wrote: *I want to unfold. I don't want to stay folded anywhere, because where I am folded, there I am a lie*. Maybe letting go and allowing ourselves to sink deeper into truth is also a process of unfolding ourselves, corner by corner, exposing what is covered and unexamined to the light.

### **What's Helping Me Right Now**

- What is giving me life this week are the blooming Bleeding Heart and the Solomon's Seal plants in my yard. They are among the first plants to bloom, and their bursts of pink and white are both dainty and fleeting. They persevere in the cruel months of early spring – snow, frost, or heatwave, and they appear out of nowhere. One day they are a little stub of green peaking up, bearing the elements, and the next moment, they are just there, budding, a dazzling image of hope and promise.
- In an attempt to maximize what we are able to do during quarantine, my family purchased paddle boards – and we have been out on Lake Harriet witnessing all kinds of wildlife virtually invisible from the walking paths. I still bike, walk, or run every, single day – but the paddle boards are a welcome variation and new perspective.
- I am in love with weeknight Compline. What a joy it is to "see" fellow Trinitarians as we gather on Zoom and say together those lovely and ancient "good night prayers," so comforting and grounding.

### **Blessing**

I have been having a series of discussions with the families of the senior high youth that were to have traveled to Spain to walk the Camino de Santiago this summer. Due to coronavirus, the pilgrimage has been postponed until summer 2021. We're sad and disappointed as we now scrounge around to recover deposits and cancel our various reservations. But I was quick to remind the pilgrims that this chapter is but one small part of the overall story of our pilgrimage. A pilgrimage begins the moment we begin dreaming about it – ours is not cancelled or ended – it's just continuing, stretching out longer and in ways we had not imagined. This week's blessing is both for our senior high pilgrims and for all of you – pilgrims of life's journey.

## Blessing the Way

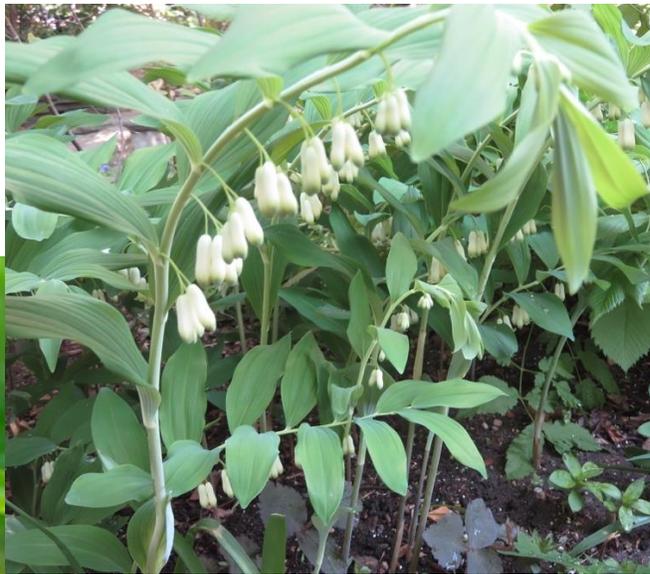
With every step you take, this blessing rises up to meet you.

It has been waiting long ages for you.

Look close and you can see the layers of it,  
how it has been fashioned by those who walked this road before you,  
how it has been created of nothing but their determination and their dreaming,  
how it has taken its form from an ancient hope  
that drew them forward and made a way for them  
when no way could be seen.

Look closer and you will see this blessing is not finished,  
that you are part of the path it is preparing,  
that you are how this blessing means to be  
a voice within the wilderness  
and a welcome for the way. Amen.

With love, Devon



### Sources:

“Kindness: A Treasure of Buddhist Wisdom for Children and Parents,” ed. Sarah Conover, pp. 7-10.

“Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons,” Jan Richardson, pp.39-40.