

“With Whom Do I Share This Journey?”

Acts 7:55-60

John 14:1-14

Jesus being raised from the dead established a common ground for all humanity. Love wins. Death loses. Jesus promises “...to put together the disparate experiences of life into a meaningful, coherent whole, to see a pattern and purpose in human history.”<sup>1</sup> Walking with Jesus and others makes a difference in life’s journey. John Huffman, Pastor Emeritus at St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, relates the following account of a troubling situation:

In January 2000, leaders of Charlotte, North Carolina, invited their favorite son, Billy Graham, to a luncheon. Billy initially hesitated to accept the invitation because he struggles with Parkinson’s disease. But the Charlotte leaders said, “We don’t expect a major address. Just come and let us honor you.” So he agreed. After wonderful things were said about him, Graham stepped to the rostrum, looked at the crowd, and said, “I’m reminded today of Albert Einstein, the great physicist who this month has been honored by Time magazine as the Man of the Century. Einstein was once traveling from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of each passenger. When he came to Einstein, Einstein reached in his vest pocket. He couldn’t find his ticket, so he reached in his other pocket. It wasn’t there, so he looked in his briefcase but couldn’t find it. Then he looked in the seat by him. He couldn’t find it. The conductor said, ‘Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I’m sure you bought a ticket. Don’t worry about it.’ Einstein nodded appreciatively. The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket. The conductor rushed back and said, ‘Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don’t worry. I know who you are. No problem. You don’t need a ticket. I’m sure you bought one.’ Einstein looked at him and said, ‘Young man, I too know who I am. What I don’t know is where I’m going.’” Billy Graham continued, “See the suit I’m wearing? It’s a brand new suit. My wife, my children, and my grandchildren are telling me I’ve gotten a little slovenly in my old age. I used to be a bit more fastidious. So I went out and bought a new suit for this luncheon and one more occasion. You know what that occasion is? This is the suit in which I’ll be buried. But when you hear I’m dead, I don’t want you to immediately remember the suit I’m wearing. I want you to remember this: I not only know who I am, I also know where I’m going.”<sup>2</sup>

Memory loss, anxiety and grief, among other things, are troubling. What would assist you navigating life’s troubles? Answer three questions: Who am I, where do I belong and how will

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<sup>1</sup>John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 30.

<sup>2</sup>As found on preachingtoday.com. This illustration was used in the Rev. Dr. John Huffman’s sermon “Who Are You, and Where Are You Going?” delivered at Preaching Conference 2002.

my life matter? On this Fifth Sunday of Easter, because Jesus was raised from the dead, you can know who you are, where you belong and how your life matters.

I'm excited to be sharing an experience with Pastor Ryan, elders Dave Lammert, Watt Prichard, Elena Bennett and Gabe Burt, along with lay leaders David Horne, Elizabeth Tedrow and Matthew Prichard. This experience is Fuller Theological Seminary's "Living A Better Story" (LABS), a two-year program helping congregations catch the new vision for youth ministry and how it's done intergenerationally, that is relationally, with the entire church family. From the first century forward, the church's ministry has been incarnational that is being in authentic relationships with God and one another. Diverse people in all ways, stages and ages worshipping, learning, connecting, serving and giving in authentic relationships with God and one another. In this regard, Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and the emerita Butman Professor of Religion at Piedmont College helps us understand the importance of sharing the journey in authentic relationships with diverse people when she writes,

By this time it had become clear to me that human diversity transcends the diversity of religions. People of faith also need help living with people who reject faith along with people of uncertain faith, who come in a wide mix of colors, classes, cultures, politics, genders, means, and abilities. Any one of these differences has as much or more power to divide people than religion, which assigns religions the additional task of making room for difference as well as conferring blessings on their own followers. Fortunately, this is something that the great religions all have in common. Whether they confess faith in the same creator-God, they agree that the truth of their teaching hinges on how people treat one another: with partiality or justice, with dishonor or dignity, with cruelty or compassion.<sup>3</sup>

We all do not share the same ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation or religious convictions, but we do believe in Jesus and listen to his voice. We gain life from each other and walk through life's experiences, life's troubles together. We need each other.

The texts in Acts 7:55-60 and John 14:1-14 declare that we need to be in authentic community with God and one another to navigate troubling times.

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<sup>3</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy* (New York, New York: HarperOne, 2019), 177.

In Acts 7:55-60, we learn that our journey in life is shared with God and others. In Stephen's case, he shared the journey with God and the other newly ordained Deacons serving the marginalized, outcast and desperate. Stephen knew with whom he shared the journey...yes with those who accused him and were stoning him, but most importantly God and his fellow Deacons. Acts 7:59-60 reads, "While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died." By knowing with whom he shared the journey, Stephen was filled with the hope, peace, joy and love of God.

In John 14:1-14, we rediscover that the most purposeful way our lives' can experience God's promised hope, peace, joy and love is to commit our lives individually and collectively to God and one another. Jesus was raised from the dead for all humanity. Love wins. Death loses. Why is this instructive for living in troubled times? The world peddles wealth and power as solutions to life's troubles. Wealth and power are incapable of keeping one's life trouble free. Jesus offers love and sacrifice. It is a solution, which offers an opportunity to be in authentic relationship with God and others in your faith community. Staying close to Jesus and one another calms the troubled life. John 14:1a and 14 read, "Do not let your hearts be troubled... If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."<sup>4</sup> Individually and collectively, we must acknowledge our need for God and one another.

Being connected in a community of faith that makes a high priority on authentic relationships with God and one another is essential to have a vibrant shared journey with God and others, regardless of life's troubles. Again, Barbara Brown Taylor, the author of *Holy Envy*, writes, "While I am waiting to learn how this story I am working on ends, I will continue to ask much of my tradition...I will keep insisting that it produce good fruit in a changing world, even as it helps me and

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<sup>4</sup>In the three paragraphs of textual analysis, I have benefited from the thinking of David J. Schlafer, Bridgett A. Green, Philip Wingeier-Rayo and Lindsay P. Armstrong in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year A, Volume 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 255-257, 257-259, 267-269 and 269-270.

others catch the new wine of the Spirit that is being poured out.”<sup>5</sup> Our best ways of thinking and speaking about God are provisional and done in authentic relationships with God and others.

*The Telegraph*, a British newspaper, ran an article in March 2017 titled “20 awful Mother’s Day cards that you absolutely should not buy.” Here are two examples:

- Mom, thanks for always checking up on me (with a picture of a cell phone with 24 unanswered calls from “Mom”).
- I’m awesome. You’re welcome. To the luckiest Mom ever.<sup>6</sup>

I recognize that Mother’s Day can be troubling for some. Life has its troubles, but just like Stephen and the early disciples, we need to trust God and others with our troubles. Ask God and others to participate with you in your life’s journey.

Who are you? You are a beloved child of God. Where do you belong? You belong to God and others. How will your life matter? You participate with God in the redemption of all creation. Let’s seek a better way to live by remembering, telling and living the way of Jesus, together. With whom do you share life’s journey? God and others. It’s the way of Jesus. Amen!

*This sermon was preached (Livestream due to the Coronavirus) on Sunday, 10 May 2020 by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh in his Study at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California*

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<sup>5</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 184.

<sup>6</sup>This illustration found on preachingtoday.com. *The Telegraph*, “20 awful Mother’s Day cards that you absolutely should not buy” (3-16-17).