

Thresholds

October 25, 2020

One of the things that is recommended to clergy to maintain psycho-spiritual and vocational health is to participate in a peer accountability group. In the Wisconsin Conference UCC, that most formally takes place in what we call Communities of Practice, in which a small group of clergy covenant to meet monthly to support, nurture, and challenge one another in our ministry and our lives. We laugh, cry, celebrate, and hold a mirror for one another in this work that can often be somewhat stressful and kind of lonely.

As you can imagine, amidst pandemic, these groups have been lifelines for people whose jobs often include absorbing the pain, struggle, and heartache of their communities. This week, my Community of Practice used the image of thresholds to talk about our churches, our ministries, and our own lives.

As we stand in this threshold time, are we (both as individuals and as a church) looking back into the room from which we came, or are we looking forward into the room where we are going? This is a worthwhile spiritual question, as Protestants the world over celebrate Reformation Sunday this weekend, as our lives are so very different than they were a year ago, and as our nation and our world are in such a profound, universal state of flux. Are you, is our church, is our society, looking back into the room from which we came or looking ahead into the room where we are going? Both are important – to assess and give thanks for what has been, and to move toward that which the Spirit is calling us next. The challenge, as we reflect on Reformation Sunday amidst COVID-19, is not to allow ourselves to be so entrenched in what has been that we stymie what is coming to be.

Our scriptures today are probably familiar to most of you. The Hebrew Scripture text that Tom read from Deuteronomy tells the story of Moses' death. Our Tuesday noon Bible Study (which is always welcoming new participants – no preparation needed) had a wonderful, robust conversation about how we are told in verse 7 that Moses' "vision was unimpaired and his vigor was unabated," but for our purposes today, remembering the story with the broadest of brushstrokes is helpful: After 40 years of leading the Israelites through the desert, after leading them out of slavery, after bringing them the 10 Commandments and getting water for them from a rock, Moses arrives at a cliff overlooking the Promised Land, arrives at the destination that he and his people have been striving toward for 40+ years, and before he steps foot into the promised land, he dies.

Friends, I am convinced that this is one of the most important metaphors in all of the Bible: we are all on a spiritual journey, are all moving toward the Promised Land, and none of us is ever going to set foot in it. The spiritual life is, by its very nature, a journey, not a destination. Pair that with our Gospel from Matthew today, in which Jesus responds to yet another attempted attack from his detractors by distilling the faith into its absolute purest form: Love God with all your mind, heart, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself, and we have two powerful tools that resonate with both the ethos of the Reformation and with our current context of personal and societal dis-ease.

One of the enduring principles of the Reformation is “semper reformanda,” that is “always reforming.” Although Martin Luther proved that this principle is deeply difficult to practice, he knew that the church, both in theology and in practice, needed to be constantly in a state of reform, that the reforms he called for were by no means exhaustive, and that their implementation would eventually result in the need for yet more reforms. Human systems are like that. We create a system or pattern or structure that serves us well for a while, and then, over time, we change and/or the world changes and/or our practices change, and suddenly what served us well doesn’t any longer.

I think of how my dad’s body learned to compensate for walking on bad knees for 40 years, and how he had to relearn to walk completely differently after he had them replaced. Or how a church at one point may have had an expectation that members wear their Sunday best as an expression of reverence, but that over time shifts toward a more casual dress code in an effort to encourage people toward a feeling of intimacy and comfort. Semper reformanda as a theological principle acknowledges that we’re always going to need to be changing, to be growing, to be adapting. This is, of course, in tension with what many of us were taught about theology, God, and the church – that it is eternal, constant, unchanging. “Because the church says so,” and “because we’ve always done it that way,” being two of the most common phrases people in churches use to shut down change and therefore growth.

But the 20th century brought about a school of theology that questioned the theory that God cannot change. Just as Jon reflected a month or so ago about needing to reassess the Platonic forms and the Greco-Roman roots of sacrifice, I’d like to encourage us all toward embracing the thought of Alfred North Whitehead and the process theologians who followed in his footsteps. The central premise of process theology critiques the Aristotelian and Thomistic understandings of God as omnipotent and omniscient. In short, process theology centers on becoming, rather than being. Rather than thinking of God as the absolute fulfillment of power and knowledge, instead of understanding a fixed, static notion to be greatest, process theology understands growth, living, and becoming to be of higher value.

To double back to our scriptures today, process theology would see the journey as revelatory of the sacred, and the end or destination as illusory. I find this incredibly freeing, because at once, it both acknowledges that what is good and right and holy and just at one time may be superseded by something else later on, and also it helps me to understand that perfection isn’t the goal, but rather we are to continually strive to do and be better.

To try to make sense of what difference this makes in our spiritual lives, I bring you back to the threshold metaphor from earlier. Irish poet John O’Donohue in his 2008 masterpiece “To Bless The Space Between Us” included a piece on thresholds. In it, he encourages us as we are encountering change, whether anticipated or not:

*At any time you can ask yourself:
At which threshold am I now standing?
At this time in my life, what am I leaving?
Where am I about to enter?
What is preventing me from crossing my next threshold?
What gift would enable me to do it?*

A threshold is not a simple boundary; it is a frontier that divides two different territories, rhythms and atmospheres...a real frontier cannot be crossed without the heart being passionately engaged and woken up. At a threshold, a great complexity of emotions comes alive: confusion, fear, excitement, sadness, hope. This is one of the reasons such vital crossings were always clothed in ritual. It is wise in your own life to be able to recognize and acknowledge the key thresholds; to take your time; to feel all the varieties of presence that accrue there; to listen inwardly with complete attention until you hear the inner voice calling you forward that the time has come to cross.

—John O’Donohue, Thresholds from “To Bless the Space Between Us”

Embracing life as fluid, as moving and changing and growing and becoming, has great psycho-spiritual power, rooted in both humility and growth. Rather than teaching that the U.S. is the greatest nation on earth, process theology would teach that we’re good and it is our job to continually strive to be better, that an even higher value than revering history would be to continually strive toward “a more perfect union.” Rather than teaching that rules that were written down in the book of Leviticus at a time when we didn’t have modern medicine, refrigeration, or pasteurization, or when adding to the population was critical to the survival of the Hebrew people, process theology would teach that while these laws were important at the time, it is possible that different principles are of higher value now. This also has great psycho-spiritual power as we are masking and worshipping from home and practicing physical distancing

and engaging in anti-racism learning and advocacy. When we frame our experience in process theology, and think of our current experiences as thresholds, we become less wedded to what had been, and instead can lend our energy toward the good that is coming, the good that is to be.

Friends, rather than being a story of thwarted plans, the story of Moses dying before he reaches the Promised Land is an incredible Reformation story of hope, a story that pulls us into process theology, because it values becoming, values growth and life, over the static. My prayer for all of us this week is that, like Moses, and in the spirit of Martin Luther and all of the great reformers, we will have the courage, with Love as our guide, to keep striving toward an ever greater good.

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