

“Today, I Am A Witness to Change”

April 25, 2021

Ch-ch-ch-changes.

Have you ever come across something that you wrote years ago? Maybe you were cleaning out your parents’ house and found a diary or journal you kept as a child. Maybe some college papers you wrote have been stashed in a box and have moved from basement to attic each time you move, but you haven’t been able to get yourself to toss the box without going through it.

If you’re anything like me, opening up those glimpses into who I was and what I thought comes with some trepidation. I’m relatively at peace with who I am right now, and know that who I am has been an evolution. My thoughts and beliefs and commitments have changed over time, hopefully rooted in a desire to be shaped ever more profoundly by God’s ways and values of faith, hope, and love, to grow in inclusion and mercy and justice and joy. This sense of trepidation – or maybe it’s anticipatory embarrassment – stems from being conscious that there are ideas that I’ve held in the past that I have set down, set aside, sometimes consciously and intentionally, and sometimes subtly over time.

I hope that all of you can say this: that there are ideas, even values, that you have set aside once your mind and soul were opened to a deeper, more Godly way of understanding things, that Romans 12:2, which reads, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect,” is deeply part of who you are. And that the first verse of the passage that Phil read for us today from the First Letter of John, which reads, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” informs how you discern and test what is the will of God.

Wounded Healer

Not only does a life rooted in the love of God and neighbor evolve, the great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen encourages us to use our transformation. In his brilliant book “The Wounded Healer,” Nouwen suggests that, “In our own woundedness, we can be a source of life for others.” UCC pastor and church consultant Mike Piazza puts it this way, “No, we have not eradicated racism, or sexism, or even homophobia from our souls, but, as we become aware of them lingering there, our soul’s struggles can become a source of grace we are able to extend to others.”

This acknowledgement that we’re wounded and still commissioned in our following of Jesus to make this world more like God’s kingdom, more like heaven on earth for others, has been one of the centerpieces of our church’s commitment to racial justice. Again, that verse from First John, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?”

“Today, I am A Witness To Change”

At the beginning of our April Worship Ministry meeting, our chair, Betty Bienash, shared a poem titled, “Today, I Am A Witness to Change.” This poem was written by NPR listeners to

respond to the heightened anti-Asian racism we are currently experiencing. Over 500 people submitted responses to the prompt, “Today, I Am A Witness to Change.”

While overtly secular, the poem can actually be seen as a powerful statement of faith when we remind ourselves that change and transformation and growth are experiences of growing grace and God’s healing in our lives, and that living an Easter life means sharing that newness of life with others. After reflecting together on how powerful the poem is, Worship Ministry decided to invite congregants to share portions of the poem with you now – as lament, as a witness to change, and as a call to action. And so, we offer you, “Today, I Am A Witness to Change.”

READER #1 – Betty Bienash

Today, I wake up tired, a tiredness that plagues me soft grey hues, contrasting over a grieving landscape, filled with many frigid hearts. Today, I ache. I lay in the pre-dawn moonshadows on my window blinds, contented kittens purring at my side. On the radio, news of greater challenges, challenges that require more than I can handle alone.

READER #2 – Zoe Harkoff

An Asian-American died because of hate. A child lost his mother. Today we mourn I cry and pray for the world. I want the attacks to be called what they are: terrorism.

READER #3 – David Hassel

Today, I feel we need more than conversation. Let us take more than a moment of silence. Let us find our humanity. Let us remember. Let us take action.

READER #4 – Adrian Caylor

Today, I hesitate for the first time. I wonder if I should stay home and not walk the neighborhood. It’s not the weather or the virus — the day is beautiful. Today I’m frozen. Terrified. I cannot hide this skin, this hair, these eyes. I see the punch, punch, punch of a community at war. Today I am a witness. I rush past the jeering white boys that say I brought corona to America. My soul is wary.

READER #5 – Bridget Flad Daniels

Today, I think about my best friend’s Korean Mom, if it was her kicked to the ground in New York, or punched in California, or shot in Georgia. Today, I remember the idea of America as a melting pot, the past 12 years looking over my shoulder watching my back. The Steak and Shake waitress in 2006 who outright refused to wait on me, who threw the menu in great disdain. The young woman in Alum Creek who was with her boyfriend, who threw a stone at me because I was doing my Tai Chi at the top of the 116 steps that I loved to go up and down.

READER #6 - Bridget Flad Daniels

I want to be somewhere and nowhere at once. I cringe at our disunity, I stand back in awe of the never diminishing divisiveness, I cry for the misunderstood and those that misunderstand. Today, I tell my youngest child that when I was a child, I wished I was white. I was silent. I allowed people around me to mispronounce my name.

READER #7 – Paco Espinosa

Today, I am witness to change. As I sit inside our bookstore, arranging the carefully printed and bound words of so many voices, I wonder who will welcome the truth.

“The Joy Luck Club” “The Hungry Tide” “Prairie Lotus”
“Pachinko” “The Namesake”

So many words, each leaving an imprint, like a grain of rice, stockpiled and cataloged, knowledge gleaned, gathered, empathy enhanced.

READER #8 – Mary Hemminger

Today, I think not only of the cold ignorance of humanity, but the small ember of warmth we transfer when we love. Today, I rise. Today, we stop telling lies.

I will stand. I will speak.

Today, I will return to normal, attending church, eating out, walking, being, because today we will persevere.

Conclusion

Today, we are witnesses to change. Today, God’s love and grace will persevere. Again, in the words of Mike Piazza, “We are all broken/wounded, infected by the toxic ‘isms’ of society, but, if we can learn to offer ourselves grace, those wounds can become a source of grace we are able to humbly share with others.”

The modern prophetess RuPaul likes to end her shows by saying, “If you can’t love yourself, how in the hell are you gonna love somebody else?” and then invites the crowd gathered to say “Amen.”) The same applies to grace. If we can’t accept our broken places with grace, we will find being agents of God’s transforming love impossible.

And so, today, as an Easter witness, my prayer is that we will at once recognize our personal and societal woundedness, while at the same time acknowledging our inherent belovedness. Friends, in doing so, we will indeed be witnesses to change, agents of God’s healing, redeeming, unfathomable love.

Alleluia and Amen.

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1 John 3:17-24; Romans 12:2-3, 9-21
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