

March 7, 2021
Third Sunday in Lent

The Pilgrimage of Becoming

Text: John 2: 13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the moneychangers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Sermon:

It was dark and it kept getting darker. It was cold and by the end of it, it was much, much colder. But in the midst of it all, we discovered light that we hadn't quite seen before, and we felt warmth not experienced before. Part of it were the heart-made walking sticks; part of it was the luminaria glowing off the ice-topped snow. Part of it were those fires of light and forgiveness; part of it was ashes on top of soup spoons. Part of it were the blessings given and received. It all unfolded on that Ash Wednesday night when we collectively began our Lenten pilgrimage. On that night as we meandered under the star-lit sky, we made the commitment both to share the road and the load—of these holy moments and the path that we follow, Christ's life giving way.

I loved it because it was bodily; it involved movement; it brought to life that inherent tension that Anna Duhon named and claimed in her sharing—the one that is a natural part of pilgrimage. It is the loosening and the letting go of being that we might make way for becoming. The reality is that when we set out on a faith journey, whether it's an intentional one across the world or whether it's your journey of coming to this holy place this morning, we loosen the grip on what we cling to as our identity and formed Self to invite what might yet come. I think it's one of the reasons why millions of people every year trade in that heavy, overstuffed baggage of career, of home, of circumstance for lighter bags like a simple back pack and set out to discover what might already be all around them—what might already even be in them, but yet to discover what they are not yet fully.

As Anna pointed out, to get up and walk day after day and to become a pilgrim in a way of life is to be vulnerable and to be in a state of becoming. So whether you go on pilgrimage to some far-off land or to church this morning, when you are on pilgrimage and you discover that enlarging truth, when you enter that rare and beautiful space where the whole world seems right; where you seem One with God and revelation unfolds—you know that feeling, right? We've all had that moment when all things seem to come together. We want to bring it home with joy, don't we? But not as a souvenir or a trophy to display, but rather we want to capture its spirit as a

reminder of that singular moment—of that great learning—that we might continue to tap into its life giving force—that we might continue to grow.

Both the Ten Commandments and the very understanding of the Temple and why its current state at that time enraged Jesus so much—both actually emerged from moments of pilgrimage of becoming. They were that captured, wrapped up, brought home essence of Truth, never intended to become relics, but rather springboards. And never to be static ways of being but rather becoming—becoming the fullness of who we are as individuals and as the gathered collective beloved community too.

Remember that those Ten Commandments came back with Moses from his pilgrimage to the mountaintop; remember it was so transformative that Moses' very face glowed! Remember that the dynamism of what happened on the mountain was likened by the people at the foot by clouds and thunder and lightning. Fully alive, and in the midst of a vast wilderness to a people still being formed, I've got to believe that Moses *bounded* down the mountain with those heavy stone tablets that were light as a feather, because they were, after all, gifts of becoming. Those Commandments offered not just a blueprint for determining right and wrong, and for measuring behaviors in and out—not just as a way to praise or convict or even a way to survive that arduous journey—but rather, they were the architectural plans for a whole new way of life and a way to thrive. Jesus understood all ten of them framed together in the love of God and neighbor too; they were Commandments that set structures not to confine people to that moment in the wilderness because, trust me, they did not want to stay there, no matter how transformational, but rather—for a people on the move, for that's who they were, rather ways of living that foster becoming.

Whenever I ask about the Commandments, we haltingly name them; usually among the first is, "Thou shalt not kill." It's good advice but it's not just a prohibition against any one person doing such a wrong; rather it is a statement to the whole community that each of us should feel comfortable and free enough to know that we can go out in this world, not afraid of our lives being taken away from us. It is an invitation to wholeness—to risk something big for something good—to go out there and serve in recognition that our life is valued, not just by us but by neighbor and friend too. Do you remember Jesus saying, "I came to give you life abundantly."

"Thou shalt not commit adultery." It's not just a taboo of seeking pleasure without but a statement to all lovers on the holiness of attention, of devotion and of lovemaking. Did you know that rabbinic teaching instructs all couples to engage in intimacy on the Sabbath as a renewal of such attention and devotion, because such intimacy opens and leads us to new and unimagined places.

"Thou shalt honor thy father and mother," not just a command to behave, although I may have pulled it out on Jakey now and then, but it's an invitation rather to honor the customs that your parents heard from their parents—to honor the traditions that make you a family—and to honor the history of all of it, even as each of us as individuals and maturing people claim our lives as our own. Did you know that in the UCC Constitution there is just such a directive—to honor what has come before so that we may make our faith our own in this generation.

The command not to bear false witness is a prescription both for truth-telling but also is a powerful reminder not just of injury toward one another but that it's false witness that is almost always at the heart of sexist, homophobic, racist and xenophobic commentary. Do not bear false witness; instead lift up.

And finally, avoiding covenant and just imposing some righteous sense of "It's good what I have"—even though that's true, but equally an invitation to consider, despite what the world says, what *is* really important—what we should want to have—and where we should devote our entire being. All of those were inspired from that moment of transcendence and transformation, but the challenge of course is that no matter how perfectly or even vividly—anything—even the Ten Commandments capture the truth of such moments, it really was in the living of the moment that beauty sprung forth. It was in the case of Moses coming face to face with God, or at least face to the back side of God, that his whole face glowed and with it the people were changed.

No matter how good or how true, things like Commandments lose their vitality whenever we seek to contain them. I wonder how it might look differently if every time we encountered or contemplated one of these Ten Commandments that instead we looked at it as a springboard—as a jumping off place for new pilgrimage—to let go of all the baggage we've accumulated, including our need to be right or our fears that we are so wrong, and instead let these Commandments shape us and point us toward where we and our community might become.

After all, it would be God through the prophet Jeremiah who would proclaim that these things written on cold, dead stone would instead become written on our hearts—so that they might be our guidance into the fullness of living—that they might occupy the very place of our becoming. After all, Jesus is going to climb another mountain, and in Matthew's Gospel, he will thunder about all the Commandments and about other core teachings, giving a clarion call to keep them always inspirational, aspirational and transformational. Jesus said, "You have heard these teachings," and by that he meant that you've heard them so often that you have them memorized. You have heard them so often that you could spout them from faith; you have heard them so often that you dare not ignore them. But, he said, "I tell you instead to honor their spirit of becoming to follow them where they lead." He said that about murder and adultery, about divorce and swearing about justice and revenge, and he finished by saying it about love too. Don't just love your neighbor, to which all these Commandments point but let that love take you all the way to loving your enemies. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus said, "Don't just love them but pray for the." No static but generative; not stuck but moving; not just inward piety but outward generosity.

Pray—Jesus said—pray. For that is not just a prescription for good living, although I will tell you that those who have a regular and deep prayer life might testify to just how good it is. But prayer too is an act of becoming, individually and collectively. What is at the heart of all this righteous indignation of Jesus at the temple in our Gospel reading of overturning the tables—of chasing around with whipcords? For you see, the Temple as a house of prayer likewise came from a great pilgrimage. It was a moment of such truth and joy and clarity that it stuck, even if sometimes we forget it, even here and now.

You see David had a pilgrimage. He went out to where the Arc of Covenant was being held, and he wanted to bring that Arc home—the symbol of God’s very presence back to the Holy City to the place of worship—even though it was still a tent. While Moses glowed, David danced! Do you remember that he danced so hard that all his clothes, down to his under-garments, came right off? But rather than being ashamed, the people danced right along with him because the joy was palpable. Although David might not have glowed, the whole community was enlivened. And he brought that Arc back to the temple and he brought it to the tent and installed it there, and here’s what he instructed the priest to do. He said, “Pray. Every day come and pray. Pray in joy and thanksgiving. Pray in invocation; pray in praise.” And Solomon would take that idea and when he built that first great edifice, he made another prayer—that all foreigners who directed their attention to this Temple, may God hear their prayers too. Because prayer opens us to others—even foreigners.

It was exactly how Jesus referred to the Temple in Mark’s account of the story, and by the way—if you go all the way to Revelation, it’s at the heart of this place of worship too. Here’s what I know about prayer: it is an act of profound risk-taking and openness. It is freeing up what is in our lives—naming it, honoring it, and letting go of it that we might become. Here’s what I also know. It works. It absolutely works. There is evidence of its efficacy in journals of religion, in journals of health and science too. Even more, there is testimony that you have repeatedly given from your own lives, thanking people from this congregation for their prayers and how they have worked. They work when joy comes and health returns but they work equally well and sometimes more powerfully on those roads where it is simply wholeness and possibility that come in the midst of pain and suffering.

I am moved by the way this congregation prays; oh, I love it when you text in and I wish you would text in more, but I love it when we can actually look out in this room and hear the emotion of the prayer and see the faces of prayer, saying out loud those things that are so often confined to silence—or more accurately—silent and lonely suffering. Because when we pray, we bring them to God and we name them out loud to neighbor, not what we think either wants to hear but what needs to be said, to be freed and what needs to be overcome. I can’t wait until we can be back together so that we might pray together and so that we might become; it is not the act that is a compulsion, but true prayer is joyously received invitation. It is not at its best when it is habit to be performed to demonstrate our goodness or our piety, but’s perfect when it’s a practice of allowing the Holy One into the places of our celebration, our shortcoming and our burdens too. It is perfect when it’s an act of who we are and yet openness to who we will yet be. Praying works because it loosens the being that there might be becoming; it allows us to be fully who we are without that momentary truth becoming a trap to reality. It connects us to God and neighbor now and forever; it launches us on a pilgrimage of hope.

Don’t you dare let this place and its holy calling become a dead end of consumerism or purchase—is what Jesus is saying. Don’t you dare privilege the religious experience at the cost of others. No, instead Jesus is saying, “Get all that out of here. Let this be a place of healing, wholeness, new beginnings and even resurrection. On that cold and becoming colder—that dark and becoming darker night, we got out of our houses and our rhythms and routines to come to this holy house that we might get out of our ruts, that we might let go of anything weighing us down or holding us back, and instead lean on an ancient rituals in new ways—not just of being

but of becoming. All of what we have—Commandments, traditions, practices, even as high and holy as worship—are precious and amazing gifts but never to be locked up or locked away. Instead they are gifts to be engaged in the act of becoming—that more light and truth might break forth, and that like the disciples, we might believe not just in our minds but in all that we do. In that way, we live into the truth that Jesus came to proclaim, and that Julian of Norwich said—that through a life well lived, faithfully and openly, that friends—all will be well. Indeed, all things will be well. Friends, it is time to keep moving, to loosen our grip on being and instead, to engage in becoming. It is a high and holy calling—and one that is worthy not just of this moment or even this holy season, but of our whole lives too.

Amen.

Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor