

SERMON

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John 17:20-26

Jesus prayed for his disciples, and then he said. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one."

One of the things I do, and have done for many years, is share the front seat of a hearse with funeral directors. We invariably talk about how we each got into our respective vocations and tell a few stories or share some wise observations. Yesterday I rode to Glen Ridge Cemetery in Glen Burnie. The conversation drifted to our shared *sense of tragedy* concerning the opioids epidemic across the county. Every family seems to be touched by the crisis. I looked up the statistics as we drove together and talked. The numbers are so large, I didn't trust the accuracy of the website. More than 200,000 cases of overdoses per year. "Common for people from 19 to over 60 years of age."

Funeral directors and clergy see what happens to families. Something is missing. "What do you think?" I asked. "From your perspective, what's going on?" In a word, he said, "Families. Family life." "If I were to come up with one word," I echoed. "It would be Time. Real time together." But, of course, there are no simple answers. Some people resort to pain killers, prescribed or not—but I'd say we all share the same pain. Pain. And the inevitable condition which includes some necessary suffering. But something is missing.

Pain is an age-old condition—but perhaps, we have, as a society, lost sight of the age-old remedy. I've been reading a series of books lately that have to do with the stages of life—David Brook's book, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*," and Richard Rohr's book, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*." I'd like to share with you what Rohr has to say about something he calls "The Tragic Sense of Life." The Tragic Sense of Life. "Jesus," he writes, "and the Jewish prophets were fully at home with the tragic sense of life." It is what shaped the nature of reality for them. And it is this sense of reality—the *tragic sense of life*—that makes all the difference in the way they understand the world and our place within it.

What does it mean? It means that life is not, nor ever has been, a straight line forward. Life is characterized much more by exception and disorder than by total or perfect order. Life, as the biblical tradition makes clear, is both loss and renewal, death and resurrection, chaos and healing at the same time. “Life is a collision of opposites.” It is faith *with trust* that can be an underlying life force so strong that it even includes death. This sort of faith includes reason, but is a larger category than reason. Truth from this perspective is not always about pragmatic problem solving and making things work, but about reconciling contradictions.

Life is inherently tragic—we all live and fall and eventually die—and that is a truth that only faith, but not our logic, can accept and embrace. The reality that we are now beginning to respect—both is science and spirituality—is that the universe seems to proceed through a web of causes, producing ever-increasing diversity, multiplicity, dark holes, dark matter, death and rebirth, loss and renewal in different forms. If we expect something different, some easy road, if we expect our children to run in a straight line—we are perhaps inflicting impossible goals and expectations on us all.

In the spiritual life we learn much more by honoring and learning from the exceptions than by just imposing our previous certain rules to make everything fit. This is a radical judgement on our present day culture. But, I hear stories of internet bullying and see young people struggling— in some sort of panic—to find acceptable identities —a rather lose-lose proposition. Or those who have just opted-out.

Truth is, our daily experience in this world is always filled with huge diversity and variation. *Jesus had no trouble with the exceptions whether they were prostitutes, drunkards, Samaritans, lepers, Gentiles, tax collectors, or wayward sheep.* Jesus did not seem to teach that one size fits all, Every time God forgives us, God is saying that what matters most is the relationship that God wants to create with us.

The Gospel preaches that life is tragic, but then graciously adds that we can survive and will even grow from this tragedy. It’s the great turnaround. That what looks and feels like down, is actually UP. The genius of the biblical revelation is that it does NOT deny the dark side of things but forgives failure and integrates falling to achieve its promised wholeness. Wholeness—a much better word to understand the meaning of “salvation.”

Jesus was fully at home with this tragic sense of life. Jesus' ability to find a higher order inside constant disorder is the very heart of his message, and why his message still heals and renews all that it touches. The cross itself is a sign of the tragic sense of life. The tragic sense of life is ironically not tragic at all. Rather it is living in *deep time*, connected to past and future and prepares us for what is necessary suffering—that's life—and keeps us from the despair about our own failure and loss and ironically offers us a way through it all.

The tragic sense of life is like the blues—mysteriously and wonderfully, we find that going through it, we are embraced and somehow healed. We join the great parade of humanity—past, present, and future—those who walked ahead of us and will follow after us. Finally, faith is simply to trust *the real* and to trust that God is found within it. Jesus said, “Go deep! Do not be afraid.”

In today's Gospel lesson, we hear the words of Jesus, about to leave his disciples and the life they have lived together. We may look upon this lesson as his final words to them, but look again. He is not speaking to them. He is not telling them what to do or how to be. He is not giving them impossible instructions. This is a prayer, not to them but for them. Jesus is asking God to take care of them. He asks for love. He asks that they be the recipients of the sort of love he has known and received. He prays that the oneness and unity and compassion that he has experienced will be theirs as well. *God is the beginning and the end*. He asks that they have a sense of being part of God's life and God's plan and God's purpose. He knows that the *sense of life's tragedies* can and will be absorbed into the love and compassion of God. He asks that they, that we, be God-entrusted rather than self-entrusted.

At this point in the story, Jesus is about to leave, about to die—some instructions would have seemed really helpful. But he Jesus didn't give any. There is no list except to say, that when we live a God-entrusted life it is possible for our tragedies to be transformed—boundaries to soften, our divisions not to be as deep, and our relationships to be reconciled. Each time we take a step toward a God-entrusted understanding of ourselves and let go of a self-entrusted life we move towards the oneness of which Jesus speaks.

Something IS missing. But it's not God. I'm afraid that the “something that's missing” is us. May we hear Christ's prayer on our behalf. May God hear His prayer and enfold us in his love.

AMEN.