

Why Are You Here?

January 28, 2024

Tone

A while back, I read an article about someone reshaping their work to better balance their priorities. Now, I'm not usually one to post comments on the internet. Don't get me wrong, I have plenty of opinions, but I have developed a tremendous degree of self-restraint, both because I remind myself of just how prideful it is to imagine the wider world will somehow benefit by my opinions, and because, despite doing public speaking each week, I'm remarkably thin skinned.

Nonetheless, for some reason, after reading this article about finding work-life balance, I posted a comment something to the effect of, "and doesn't it feel good when you figure out that running like a rat in a maze isn't the point of life anyway?"

It seemed like an innocuous enough statement. A handful of people "liked" it. And then I got a notification that someone had commented on it. Of course, curiosity got the best of me, so I looked to see what they had written, only to see that a complete stranger had replied to my comment about the freedom of not running the rat race, "Who hurt you?"

Now, I'll admit, I was taken aback. The comment sliced. It stung. It felt like an attack. I looked back at my comment; it wasn't particularly hurtful, bitter, or critical.

But then I started noticing the same comment in more and more places. "Who hurt you?" has become a glib, snide, way of saying, "You're a mess," or "What's wrong with you?" Of course, never has anyone who posted, "Who hurt you?" in response to an internet comment actually been interested in finding out who did actually hurt you, why you believe the things you do, or what makes you tick. The internet comment, "Who hurt you?" really means, "I'm superior to you."

Silence, Unclean Spirit

This exchange came to mind as I was praying this Sunday's Gospel and our music ministers and I were planning today's hymns. As Haley explained in her article in This Week at Union last week, she, Ray, and I get together a few weeks in advance to plan hymns based on the scripture readings and other themes of the day. As we were planning, we came across a hymn that is based on today's Gospel, in which Jesus encounters a man who is described as having an unclean spirit, and Jesus commands the spirit to be silent and come out of the man. This being Annual Meeting Sunday, my prayer had been leading me in the direction of exploring with you the themes of connection and community, and how one of the graces of being part of a church is that if we really invest ourselves in a church community, we have people who play the Jesus role in our lives, calling out the frenzied, unclean spirits that are often part of our lives.

All three of us really found this hymn compelling, and the lyrics supported the direction my preaching was going in. At issue is the tone. The hymn tune itself is frenzied. It's supposed to be. It's richly evocative, making the tone of our Gospel passage come alive. AND, it's disconcerting in its own way. Because the lyrics connect so well to our Gospel, we decided to set them to a different hymn tune which we'll sing shortly, but I kept coming back to the fact that the frenzied

nature of the original hymn tune has something to say to us. And so, Haley and Ray have agreed to share the first verse of the hymn accompanied by its original tune, just to give you a taste of it.

[Haley and Ray offer verse 1 of “Silence, Frenzied, Unclean Spirit.”]

Evocative, isn't it? It's rich, and it's unbalancing. In hearing it, and singing it to this tune, we aren't brought to a place of peace, tranquility, stability. Rather, it swirls with chaos. Kind of like the comment, “Who hurt you?” It has the power to slice, but it doesn't then deliver us to a place of healing.

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So I've been praying with this text and with this song for close to a month now, trying to figure out how to weave together these ideas of community and showing up for one another and the healing power of Jesus' Gospel of love and the concept that the tone of how we approach something can be just as important as the content of our message. Usually, I have examples and themes in mind weeks in advance, but this time, my prayers and observations of the world were bringing me crickets. I wouldn't say I was worried. The Holy Spirit hasn't let me down yet. But I was getting anxious. Perhaps not frenzied, but knocking on frenzy's door.

Then, lo and behold, Lou Norsetter brought an article from the New York Times as the devotional for Priscilla's Circle on Tuesday. In it, Rabbi Sharon Brous describes an ancient Jewish ritual. She says that several times a year, thousands of pilgrims would descend on Jerusalem and climb up to the Temple Mount. The majority of people would walk up to the courtyard and enter to the right, walking around the courtyard counterclockwise.

Meanwhile, the brokenhearted, the mourners (and here I would also include the lonely and the sick), would make this same ritual walk but they would turn to the left and circle in the opposite direction: every step against the current.

And each person who encountered someone in pain would look into that person's eyes and inquire: “What happened to you? Why does your heart ache?”

“My father died,” a person might say. “There are so many things I never got to say to him.” Or perhaps, “My partner left. I was completely blindsided.” Or: “My child is sick. We're awaiting the test results.”

Those who walked from the right would offer a blessing. “May the Holy One comfort you,” they would say. “You are not alone.”

—Rabbi Sharon Brous

And then they would continue to walk until the next person approached.

This sounds both incredibly meaningful and incredibly difficult, for all involved, truth be told. It also gives us an incredible witness to what it means to be church, to be community. One year, I may walk to the right, but I know there will be some time that I will walk to the left, and when I do, there will be others to encounter my pain with me and to offer a blessing.

Rabbi Brous notes that one take away from this ritual is to remind us:

Do not take your broken heart and go home. Don't isolate. Step toward those whom you know will hold you tenderly.

And this applies to both those who are troubled and those who are well. When we are well, it is our responsibility to show up for those who are struggling.

She says that:

Asking, with an open heart, "Tell me about your sorrow," may be the deepest affirmation of our humanity even in terribly inhumane times.

It is an expression of both love and sacred responsibility to turn to another person in her moment of deepest anguish and say, "Your sorrow may scare me, it may unsettle me. But I will not abandon you. I will meet your grief with relentless love."

We read of Jesus calling out the unclean spirit and imagine he's able to do this because of some divine superpower. But Rabbi Brous reminds us:

Showing up for one another doesn't require heroic gestures. It means training ourselves to approach, even when our instinct tells us to withdraw. It means picking up the phone and calling our friend or colleague who is suffering. It means going to the funeral and to the house of mourning.

The ritual Rabbi Brous describes, of people who are struggling, who are mourning, walking against the current, being invited to tell the stories of their struggles, and being blessed, has yet another component. Along with the sick and the lonely and those in mourning, people who had been ostracized from the community also entered into the current and walked to the left. They, too, were asked to tell their stories.

"Why are you here?"

Unlike the random stranger on the internet whose smug superiority asks, "Who hurt you?" in asking an ostracized person, "Why are you here?" we are attempting to understand where their pain comes from.

This is breathtaking. The ancient rabbis ask us to imagine a society in which no person is disposable. Even those who have hurt us, even those with views antithetical to ours, must be seen in their humanity and held with curiosity and care.

Conclusion

Friends, as we celebrate the 188th Annual Meeting of this congregation today, I can think of no better image of what it means to be church than to be a training ground for showing up, a workshop where we practice caring for others and being willing to be cared for. In a couple of moments we'll sing "Silence, Frenzied, Unclean Spirit" to a different tune than the original that Haley and Ray shared with us. I hope the new tune draws us to a place of healing and peace, rather than one of frenzy. And, likewise, my prayer as our church embarks on our 189th year, is that we will continue to be a community that genuinely asks, "Why are you here?" and in turn, offers blessing. May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen!

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