

Thanksgiving Sunday

Toward the end of the hit show *Ted Lasso* - which is a “fish out of water” story - about an American football coach hired to coach an English soccer team, the fictional AFC Richmond. Ted is hired, we soon realize, in the hopes that he might fail and run the team into the ground.

Right at the beginning when he arrives, Ted puts up a sign in the locker room so that the whole team can see it. On yellow construction paper in blue lettering, Ted tapes the word “Believe” above his office door. To make a long story short, Nate, who goes from locker room helper to assistant coach with AFC Richmond, gets jealous of Ted’s success, and ends up getting poached by a rival soccer team. But in his anger and hurt, Nate rips the sign off the wall and tears it up.

As the show progresses, the audience is witness to Nate’s growth and his healing. He has kept the sign. With paint, glue, and brush, he sits at his table and mends the sign. Restored to Ted’s coaching team, with the help of his colleagues, Nate tapes the newly mended sign above the office door where it belongs: Believe. It is visibly cracked and torn, but it has been restored.

From *Ted Lasso* to *Star Wars*, says American artist Makoto Fujimura in conversation with Mary Hynes on CBC Tapestry, the art and the metaphor of kintsugi abounds. Kintsugi is a five hundred-year-old Japanese lacquer technique, whereby, kintsugi masters and artists take what is broken - a plate, bowl, vase, a vessel of some kind - and, instead of throwing it away, repair and restore the item using a layer of metal dust, most often gold, to mend the broken item. These masters and artists will focus, not on hiding the broken sherds, but will instead focus on highlighting the patterns of brokenness. For the kintsugi master or artist, it is the brokenness of the piece that becomes the beginning of creating something new, something of beauty - a beauty which holds onto all the imperfections.

Taken as a metaphor, like with the writing from the show *Ted Lasso*, Kintsugi is a turning toward our brokenness, the pain we feel, the traumas we have experienced, and not avoid or deny or run from them, but to see thing of it, to behold and accept it on some level, and then to mend.

In our reading from Luke's gospel, Jesus is somewhere between Samaria and Galilee on the road toward Jerusalem, when he approaches a village where ten lepers, people whose skin diseases rendered them unclean according to the law, come out to meet him. They shout to him for mercy, cry out to him to heal their painfully cracked and swollen skin, their mangled joints and missing fingers, their cloudy eyes.

In this healing, there is no touching by Jesus, no power coming out from his hemlines or fringes to stop a flow of blood, no saliva spit into his palm to make mud for blinded eyes. Jesus hears and sees those who cry out to him and instructs the ten to go to the priests who will declare them clean, and healed. As the ten follow Jesus' words, his command to go, each of them is miraculously healed.

Luke tells us that only one leper turns back to Jesus to give thanks. Only one leper out of the ten healed, returns to the source of his healing, acknowledging what God is accomplishing through Jesus on that road to Jerusalem.

It is not an accident that the one who returns healed, and grateful, is a Samaritan, an outsider. Because in Luke's gospel, Jesus' mission, his bringing and proclaiming the creative work of God's kingdom of mercy and life, extends itself outside of religious and ethnic identities to include all within God's expansive and loving purview.

The Samaritan leper catches sight of what the others refuse to - what they understandably want to leave behind, to move past, to forget: their brokenness. However, the Samaritan perceives his healing is part of something bigger, something not to be forgotten, for in his healing he

remembers where he once was and in gratitude he returns to the Master and Artist who has made and is making all things new.

Fujimura says of kintsugi that, “It’s really the message of our time. I believe this generation coming up [is] experiencing so much trauma and fracture, they need to have this metaphor and understanding in their lives... to see something beautiful come out of broken places.”

In a world that feels very broken, with the lasting scars and fractures in communities and families from the pandemic, scars that we are still processing, with wars breaking out and conflicts protracted into decades, with a climate emergency swindling us out of a sense of any security for the future, the remedy, according to kintsugi and to Christianity, is to hold these things, all the lesions which maim and fissures which break, to not run from them, to join in the art of creation, to bear good fruit, to turn what is broken and cracked into a thing of beauty.

Each of us, according to Fujimura, is “invited to live gratuitously into that promise of extravagance, and hope, and joy that God must have had in creating the universe of our love.” In that creative love, we are seen as God sees us. Yes, broken and wounded, maimed and scarred, in need of healing and restoration, yet also at the same time beloved, mendable and beautiful. We are called into that creative love, that same beauty, and invited into the project which God has already initiated: bringing love and beauty into the world. The Samaritan who returned to Jesus to give thanks accepted that invitation and would not forget.

This Thanksgiving, as we celebrate God’s goodness and abundance, may we behold ourselves and one another as God does, seeing our beauty through the patterns of cracks and sherds, this God in Christ who mends us together with bands of mercy and life, ever doing a new thing for us and among us, a new thing in us and through us.

This is the creative work of the kingdom of God, Master and Artist. It is the work of healing and restoration as seen in the cleansed lepers, even

in the ones who forgot to return to give thanks. In manna received from heaven and water from the rock, even to those who grumbled and complained in the wilderness. In a table spread with abundance and grace, even to those who only see and live out of scarcity. This is the work of the kingdom of God in and through Jesus to a people and a world cracked and torn, yet also, mercifully and gratefully, restored and beautiful.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Parable of the Wedding Feast

“When the dust clears, and in the quiet of your own heart, what kind of God do you believe in, really? And why?” This a question, or a two-part question, which Peter Enns, American biblical scholar and theologian, asks in his book *The Sin of Certainty*.

The question is an important one, for how we answer informs how we live out what it means to be called followers of Jesus. It’s an important question as we explore the parable of the wedding feast from Matthew’s gospel.

Now, there is a similar parable found in Luke’s gospel. In Luke, the parable is told not of a king, but of a “someone” who throws a dinner party, not a wedding banquet. The same kind of scenario unfolds in both Matthew and Luke, as the people who are initially invited refuse to attend because they are simply too busy with their own affairs or because they take the invitation lightly. In Luke, slaves are sent out into the streets to bring in the poor, the blind, and the lame. Once that is accomplished, there is still more room at the dinner party, and so are ordered to go and get more people.

In Luke, Jesus tells this parable when he is invited to a meal at a Pharisee’s home. There he sees the invitees taking the seats of honour for themselves, and Jesus uses the opportunity to teach about the kingdom; that in the kingdom of God those who hold higher positions socially should humble themselves. In the kingdom of God, the party should and does include the lowly and the outcast.

In Matthew, however, Jesus tells this parable after he has cleansed the temple and overturned the money changers tables, after he has cured the blind and lame in the temple. These acts spark the religious leaders’ anger and they question Jesus’ authority to say and do these things. Jesus then tells the parable of a king who throws a wedding banquet for his son. This is a royal wedding. The invited guests don’t bother to show up. Slaves are sent out to remind them of the invitation, but again, the people are too busy to respond, rather absurdly mistreating then killing the slaves, which becomes an affront to the king. Slaves’ bodies in ancient times would be

considered the same body as the king who they are representing. What is done to them is done to him. Now insulted and enraged, the king reacts by dramatically increasing the violence in the parable, sending his troops into the city to kill these insolent invitees and destroying their city. Then, with what feels like an even more peculiar addition to the end of the parable, a stranger is found and called out for wearing improper attire, this interloper who seems to refuse to be part of the festivities by not complying with the standard dress. Still angry, this king banishes this wedding guest to the outer darkness. And with that, the end sentence sums up what seems like the moral of the parable: "For many are called but few are chosen."

But is that what the kingdom of heaven is to be compared to? Disrespectful and violent guests, innocent slaves and citizens killed, an enraged king who uses violence to destroy and punish? Is the king in this parable supposed to be God? Are we meant to hear this as allegory, derive some hidden meaning or some final moral to the story? In our effort to understand this ancient story, should we sanitize it so that it becomes palatable for us?

When the dust clears, and in the quiet of your own heart, what kind of God do you believe in, really? And why?

I have to admit the violence of the parable bothers me. I think it should. If I compare the king to God, which I'm not convinced is Jesus' intention here, then this is not the God I have come to experience and know in my own life - a God who keeps extending an invitation to the wedding, a God who, when I am too busy or too afraid or too doubtful, calls me again and again into this kingdom reality, calls me into this reign of love and mercy, a kingdom reality that I desperately need when so much tilts toward our inhumanity toward one another.

Yesterday morning, Kevin drove me down to the church for Chris Herrnberger's memorial service. Thoughts of a family's sorrow, of loving and loss, of doing the work of saying goodbye, of the rituals which shape our lives, were filling my head. As we drove down High Street I noticed a

boy, maybe three or four years old, at least it looked like he hadn't had his "land legs" for too long. He was walking with an adult female, I would venture to guess was his mother. Someone had dressed him appropriately for the cooler weather - long pants, a red jacket, and a gray toque on his head. His toque had a few knitted spikes on it, perhaps like a dinosaur, or some kind of animal, I couldn't quite see. Hand in hand, these two humans walked together, as the little boy looked around in a kind of wonder - not aware of wars raging in the world, of people fighting over land and territory, of innocent civilians dying at the hands of the powerful.

"What a sweet boy," I said to Kevin, "so precious and fragile." Then, as I continued on, another thought came rushing: this is how God sees. This is who God sees all of us: precious and fragile.

Peter Enns writes this of the Bible: "I've learned to accept this paradox: a holy book that more often doesn't act very much like you would expect it, but more like a book written two thousand to three thousand years ago would act. I expect the Bible to reflect fully the ancient settings in which it was written, and therefore not act as a script that can simply be dropped into our lives without a lot of thought and wisdom. The Bible must be thought through, pondered, tried out, assessed, and (if need be) argued with - all of which is an expression of faith, not evidence to the contrary."

As we think through and even argue with this parable, perhaps the common denominator in the two parables told in different contexts in Matthew and Luke, is that there is a party meant for all and a feast that we are called to share, and the invitation to that party comes with a warning, a caveat, a calling to attention, that we can be too busy with our own stuff to notice it, or, depending upon where we locate ourselves, too afraid of giving up our power to share it, or, too intent on being gatekeepers for it, on who we think is in and who we think is out. When we do any of these things, we fail to see that we have been graciously given an invitation and, surprisingly, so has everyone else.

Rachel Held Evans wrote these words before her death, words I have used before in a sermon but still applicable for us today as we ask the questions of ourselves and of God. She wrote, “to live and love fully, to embrace human vulnerability rather than exploit it, to try to make sense of our place in this fragile yet beautiful world, to seek to understand our role in proclaiming God’s love and justice - this has been the work of generations... It’s the promise that calls us to greet every sunrise and surrender to every sunset. It’s the best hope of our oldest prayers...”

So, when the dust clears, and in the quiet of your own heart, what kind of God do you believe in, really? And why?

Amen.