

Lent 4B

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To Remember We are Inextricably Connected

John 3:16. Possibly the most recited verse in the Gospels. It's everywhere - at sporting events, on billboards and bumper stickers. This is a verse that even Episcopalians know by heart. As cherished as it is, this verse is one with which I constantly struggle. Not so much with what it says, but what we Christians do with it. We take these words about God's expansive and audacious love for the world made known in the person of Jesus, most especially in his journey to the cross and we turn it into some intellectual formula. We take God's promise of salvation -of wholeness and reconnection and renewal and we turn it into a litmus test for faith. Rather than using this promise as a way to communicate God's all-encompassing compassion and mercy it becomes a means for judgment and a threat for those whom we think are beyond the reach of God's salvation. Rather than being heard as an invitation to participate in spreading God's love it's seen as a directive to exclude those we think don't believe the way we do. We've gotten so good at exclusion that we even use the Bible to keep our lines drawn and our walls fortified so that we can be clear about who's in and who's out.

Dr. Brene Brown, a prominent research professor and author spoke at the Washington National Cathedral a few years back about this idea of belonging. She observed that over the past twenty year we have sorted ourselves by ideology into factions or bunkers. "We now live with, worship with, work with, go to school with, hang out with people who believe like us and we have very little interest in being with those who don't." Brown has discovered a fascinating correlation to this growing bunker mentality. The rates of loneliness have risen in proportion to grouping ourselves with those who are like-minded. "The more sorted we become, the lonelier we are. Behind the barricades of belief is not real connection," Brown reflects. "We just hate the same people. And I don't think hating the same people is how we connect with each other." She calls it "Common Enemy Intimacy." Brown believes that we have found ourselves in a crisis of spiritual connection. Spiritual connection defined as "the deeply held belief that we are inextricably connected to each other by something greater than us and something that is

rooted in love and compassion.” “And here’s the thing about the inextricable connection between me and you and the Syrian refugee and the mother in the Congo, it cannot be severed. But it can be forgotten. We have completely forgotten that we are connected to each other.” We are lonely because we hunger for that reconnection and wholeness that is promised to us in the words of John’s Gospel.

Another researcher and Episcopal laywoman, Diana Butler Bass points out “that the English word ‘believe’ comes from ‘belieben’ — the German word for love. To believe is not to hold an opinion. To believe is to treasure. To hold something beloved. To give my heart over to it without reservation.” We can’t overlook that these well-known words from John’s 3rd chapter are addressed to Nicodemus, a Pharisee, one of the religious elite and well-educated men of his day who is curious about this Rabbi from Nazareth and who has come seeking answers. And in response to Nicodemus’ curiosity, Jesus tells him to give his heart over to him, to let go of everything he thought he knew about the life of faith and to trust in his way of sacrificial, suffering love. To believe in him cannot be reduced to some formula or litmus test. It is more of heart thing than a head thing.

In this Lenten season as I imagine Jesus’ journey to Calvary carrying the horizontal beam of the cross, a large, heavy piece of wood that that his hands were strapped to, I see those arms and hands outstretched, his heart open, entering fully into the human experience. This image symbolizes what it means for us to walk the way of the cross with Jesus, to be open to the needs of the world, to risk bearing with one another the struggles and joys of our shared, human journey. We manufacture bunkers and hunker down inside of them because we mistakenly believe that if we only live with and worship with and work with those who are just like us and think just like us, then we are somehow safer and more content. But in our carefully maintained bunkers we forget our deep connectedness to one another and to the source of that connection, our loving and gracious God.

How do we open our hearts to it, trust in it, trust in Jesus and his way? Brene Brown asked the question in her research, “What do men and women do who maintain that belief in inextricable connection?” The answers were, ‘Find moments of collective joy and pain and be a part of them. Find ways to be with people in communion that you don’t know as a reminder that the connection is real and alive whether we forget it or not.’”

She recalls her beloved city of Houston and some of their collective moments of pain and joy. The tragedy of Hurricane Harvey and how the community came together, giving each other hope in the midst of their pain. Complete strangers using their boats to rescue those trapped by the rising waters. And never once did someone say, "Hey, I'm here to help. Who did you vote for?"

She also illustrated the power of their collective joy in telling a story about being at the Astros playoff game against the Yankees. "I'm at the last playoff game with my husband, Steve — the game of inches, as they say — watching every pitch, watching every batter. I cannot take my eyes off of the game. And it's the second-to-last batter, and I shove my hand down in my husband's back pocket, and I'm kind of holding onto his rear, like — ready. And the guy next to me goes, 'Excuse me, ma'am.'" It wasn't my husband. He had gotten up to go to the bathroom, and when he came back, he stood at the end of the aisle. But this guy remained next me to me and looked up at me and smiling said, "Go, Astros." And it was just this — when else are you singing with strangers, hugging strangers, high-fiving people around you? Again, the connection between people — you can't sever it, but you can forget it. It is so important to find moments of collective joy and pain and to lean into those, with strangers, reminding us of that something bigger that binds us to one another."

One year ago, this week we began our pandemic wilderness journey. For 365 days we have been unable to pass the peace, sing together and gather around the holy table as one. For 365 days we've been unable to stand side by side with strangers, cheering on our favorite team, enjoying a concert or gathering to celebrate a holiday with family and friends. We know now more than ever the importance of connection. The pandemic has awoken us from our complacent forgetfulness. It has given us new and creative ways to lean into those collective moments of joy and pain. We pass the peace using the chat box on Facebook and mark the special moments in our lives with Zoom gatherings. We read bedtime stories to our grandchildren on Facetime and send notes in the mail and flowers to friends. We show up in our cars and honk our horns to celebrate someone's birthday. We sit on a porch and relish an in- person conversation even from six feet apart. We delight in the connection we have with the birds and trees and streams out in God's glorious creation, appreciate the smiling the eyes of a stranger or the wave of a neighbor.

With stubborn hope and resiliency, we have learned how to maintain the bonds that bind us to one another.

The connection is alive and real for us here in this place. It will be again when we can all gather as one in worship and fellowship. God's love is alive and real for us in the communion we share with each other. It's alive and real in ways we never could have imagined a year ago. The challenge for us as we journey into a post-pandemic world is that we don't slip back into our forgetfulness, taking for granted the beautiful and sacred moments we experience in our deep connected with one another. My invitation My invitation for us one year after the pandemic forced us behind our safe walls is to not be afraid to step outside into the world again with arms outstretched and hearts open delighted to find Jesus among those who don't think like us or believe like us, trusting completely in him and his way of love. That's the Good News of John 3:16 we are called to embrace and to proclaim. *Amen.*

Dr. Brene Brown's insights came from a sermon she preached at the Washington National Cathedral and an On Being Interview with Krista Tippett.