

5 Easter B 2021

Acts 8:26-40

John 15:1-8

After working tirelessly in the first month of COVID,
The young doctor succumbed to the virus.
At first, he quarantined at home,
Sequestered from his toddler and pregnant wife,
Checking his temperature and his oxygen level.

The day came when it was clear
He had to go to the hospital.
A Black man,
He felt he had no choice but to go to his own hospital,
Even though he hated to further burden his colleagues.
Only at his own hospital could he trust
That those who treated him
Would listen to him,
And give him the care and attention
That every human being deserves,
And only some receive.

This story has a happy ending.
After several frightening days,
Filled with the fear that he would never see his wife or son again,
Or ever meet his daughter,
He began to get better, slowly.
And now, almost a year later,
His young family is happily nestled in their home,
And he is back at work.

The arc of his story is not complete yet,
Any more than our own stories have reached their end.
But the way his story is told now,
Affects his future
And that of his family,
And his colleagues, and us all.

I read this story one day last week,
While I was eating my lunch,
Thinking I was taking a break
In the midst of a day filled with questions.
The story is the centerpiece in an article on memory –
How we create memories,

How they change in community and over time. *
Of course,
The article piqued my interest,
Because I have been wondering,
Day after day, like many of you:
How will we remember these COVID times,
These racial reckoning times,
These political times?
What stories will we tell?

The way we tell our stories
Not only fixes our memories,
But shapes our future.
The way we construct stories
Out of the events of our lives, great and small,
Can make us resilient and hopeful,
Give us a sense of meaning,
And assure us that we belong.

In times of upheaval,
Reevaluation,
And inevitable change,
We have the chance,
Perhaps the responsibility,
To find and tell the stories
That will keep us connected to each other,
Engaged with the world,
And committed to the future.

We know how to do this.
This is who we are as a people.
We have done it again, and again, and again,
In times of crisis and change.

Of course
Not every story arcs toward the good.
Even in the sacred story of scripture,
There are some moments so terrible,
So unresolved,
That they can break your heart.
We try to ignore them,
And never read them in public worship,
But they remain.
And we could, and maybe should tell them,
because we are also a people who bear witness,
and who lament,

and who try to hold the tension
between the beautiful ideal
and the flawed, sometimes terrible real.

But our deepest truth is this:
We are the keepers of a story of hope,
Of wild, radical hope
That has turned the world upside down
And could do so again.
We are the keepers and sharers of stories
That bend our memories towards a hopeful arc
And create resilience and possibility.

The friends and followers of Jesus,
In those first days after he died –
In the days when they discovered that though he had died,
He was filled with new and undying life –
Those first friends
Shared their memories and captured them in stories.
Those stories grew in the exchange of memory
And became the foundation of a good and generous future.
And they point the way for us.
The stories we tell
Can make us resilient and hopeful,
And inspire us to become more and more ourselves.

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch
Has become a core story for us,
And though we cannot live, always,
Into the fullness of its promise,
We recognize that it shapes our future,
By holding out for us
a memory and a hope of welcome for all.

But what about the other story we hear today?
Jesus, the master storyteller,
Needs only a few words to make a world.
A simple image tells this story.

I am the vine, says Jesus,
And you are the branches.
If you bear much fruit,
You will be pruned to bear more fruit.

This past week
I learned some things I didn't know about tending vines.

Things I wish I had known
When a grape vine ran wild in a neglected corner of my back yard.
But that's another story.

So here's what I learned this week,
And, in fact,
In these distractable times,
I took a break from reading that article on memory
In order to search online
For more information about pruning vines.

Vines need to be pruned,
Vigorously, carefully, and radically pruned,
to bear abundant and sweet fruit.
Grapes grow on new growth
That comes straight from the hardy, parent vine.
When the canes grow too far away from the vine,
When too many years go by
And the branches are not cut back,
Radically and courageously,
The fruit is small and sparse and sour.

This image is the germ of a story.
And it seems easy to understand and remember.

But here's the trick.
As humans,
We are not only meaning-making,
Story-telling, symbol-finding creatures,
But we just can't help,
Most of us,
Most of the time,
Taking things literally, at least at first.

So when we hear Jesus talk about pruning,
We get scared.
Our minds go straight to losing,
Letting go, relinquishing.
And we begin to tell a story of sorrow,
Which begins to shape our future.

But what if,
When Jesus tells a story about pruning the vine,
he is talking,
In more general terms,
About doing whatever is needed,

Carefully and courageously,
To promote growth and sweetness?
There are more ways to do that than by cutting away.

The heart of the matter is the staying close,
Not the cutting.
What if we could extend the image of the vine,
And understand that it's about formation,
About nearness,
About intimate connection?
Then we tell a story of hope,
Which begins to shape our future.

We always need to be pruned,
To be formed,
To stay close to the source of life.
That means we need to be discerning.

We are at a turning point,
In our personal lives,
Our community life,
The life of the world.
Much has been lost.
Much has been revealed.
Much is changed forever.

As individuals,
In our church,
In our nation and the world,
It is time to take a step into the new.

How will we regather,
Lamenting what is lost,
Rejoicing in the restoration of what was precious,
While embracing what must be new?
How will we let ourselves be formed
So that we bring forth abundance?

The way we tell the story of this time
Will affect what we remember
And shape what we become.
It has always been so.
That is the story of the people of God.

The first Christians told a story
That let them and us know everyone is welcome.

The friends of Jesus
Told a story that reminded them
He would always be close,
Always give them what they need
Always call them to the radical action
that brings forth sweet abundance.

What kind of stories will we tell?
Do we have the courage to be a people of witness and lament?
Do we have the vision to be a people of resilience and hope?

A year ago,
A young Black man, a doctor,
Risked his life to treat early sufferers from a new disease,
And himself became deathly ill.
He lived.
The arc of his story is not complete yet.
How will he tell it?

Right now, when he tells the story of his experience,
There is one crucial moment.
When he was admitted to the hospital,
One of his colleagues,
Gowned and gloved and masked and shielded,
Reached across the great divide
Between infected and protected,
And touched his shoulder.

Contact, connection, compassion.
Memory, resilience, hope.

In his own time,
Jesus talked about vines and vinedressers.
If he were here, now –
And he is here, now –
Perhaps the story would be –
The story is –
How we shape and are shaped
By the challenge we share:
The challenge of this past year,
And the time to come.

* <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/05/how-will-we-remember-covid-19-pandemic/618397/>