

Navajo prayer – We are now as one with rock and tree.
We are now as one with eagle and crow, with deer and coyote,
We are as one with all things that have been placed here by God (the Great Spirit).

“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven
and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”
These words from Matthew’s Gospel, binding and loosing,
have been playing in my head all week in a kind of dance
The actions of binding and loosing have a wonderful rhythm to them.
We seem to be experiencing more binding than loosing these days,
if my limited understanding of viruses is correct.
They have a diabolical ability to bind themselves to a host, in this case, us,
our cells and then take over the operation of that cell’s activity.
I imagine them as a kind of Dr. No from the James Bond series –
cackling with glee as they take over millions of cells around them.
But as “they demonstrate this blind, pitiless power of natural selection,” (The
Economist, 8/20)
they have also contributed to the evolution of human beings
into the complex creatures that we are. They aren’t just evil.
They have played a key role in the development of life on earth.
So this virus, which we never hoped to meet and to which we are now bound,
has both a good and bad role to play, like so many things in life.
These reciprocal actions of binding and loosing have traditionally been used
to describe the authority of the government, the church, which have the power
to bind us to or loose us from laws and canons that shape our lives.

This passage about binding and loosing is part of a bigger section in Matthew
which looks at how the community of Jesus’ followers should conduct itself.
Community. That word sounds so tantalizing in this time
when our ways of being community have been disrupted.
When we often view each other with suspicion more than compassion.
When we follow serpentine paths at the grocery store
to dodge those other germy shoppers.
When we try to decipher what exactly is going on behind those masks –
smiles, scowls?
The focus in this section of Matthew is the life of the Christian community,
specifically, but all communities, really.
How do we live together? How do we treat each other?
How do we resolve disagreements?
How and when are we to forgive each other?

Chapter 18, from which this chapter comes,
begins the disciples asking Jesus a question,
who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?
Jesus tells them that whoever has the humility of a child is the greatest,
not the answer they were expecting, I'm guessing.
Jesus told them and Jesus is telling us that to enter the Kingdom of Heaven
we must become like children. We must welcome them.
And entering the Kingdom is not going to heaven after you die,
it is living into the fullness of who each one of us was created to be.
It is helping to make the Kingdom real NOW.
The disciples might have secretly been hoping he would name them as the greatest,
or at least someone with some name recognition
but for Jesus to say that children were the greatest, was probably pretty shocking.
Children were barely recognized in that early society
and honestly, they have little more standing today.
So Jesus names a group that had the least power and no voice.
But of course that is the radical and constantly challenging message of Jesus.
It's the upside downness of the Kingdom that constantly eludes and challenges us.
His naming of the children as the greatest in the Kingdom
is a rebuke to those "who love the darkness of our success
more than the light of failure that streams from the Holy Child." (Parables of
Judgment p. 40).
One key way we can lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light
as Paul directs us in the passage from Romans today
is to stand with the losers – the least, the last and the lost.
And that is a hard message to hear.
We have to join the losing team???
We have to associate ourselves with them? Who wants to do that?
Who wants to join that pathetic group with concave chests
and biceps that either can't or have never lifted anything more than 10 lbs?
And this idea, of aligning ourselves with the losers, with those on the margins,
of advocating for those with the least power, isn't just a suggestion.
It's a commandment, because it is the very heart of the gospel.

This directive to include and embrace those who live at the edges of our society
is as urgent and real today as it was in Jesus' time.
It is vital to embracing light over dark.
He saw so keenly the dynamic of those who are of this world, the successful,
v. those who are unsuccessful, the failures.
That dynamic of the powerful v the powerless

has paved a well-worn groove in our communal life throughout history.
“Love is the fulfilling of the law” as it says
at the end of today’s passage from Romans.
Love and compassion are to be offered to all
and although we may like to pretend that we have nothing in common
with the homeless or the poor,
we are bound to them as surely as we are bound to our flesh and blood families.
We may live in gated communities or limit our lives to certain zip codes
but what each person experiences is a reflection of the whole.
No Man is an Island and the butterfly effect come to mind.

This summer we’ve seen the effects of marginalization.
We’ve watched way too many confrontations between police
and young black men, and the latter are always seem to be the losers.
The issue of race is one of the great themes
that has beset us from our beginnings and is as powerful today.
As important as it is for us to reckon with the past, present and future
of racial injustice,
I hope we can hold in our hearts all of those who live on the edges,
especially those who have little or no voice.
There are so many that come to mind.
Children, who Jesus names not just in this section of Matthew
but many times in the Gospels, are one example of those
who have no power, no standing and have suffered for it.
Children who need us adults to advocate for their welfare.
Or the mentally ill who are often unable to speak for themselves
but who have at best been shunned and at worst been tortured for centuries.
They have suffered throughout history for their disabilities,
because we, more typical people often find them frightening.
And finally, I would add one more example of the marginalized –
all living creatures, the vertebrates and the invertebrates,
who literally cannot speak for themselves
and who we have treated with such terrible disrespect and callousness,
wiping out whole species with our own needs and demands.
And these are just 3 examples of many groups that, due to their voicelessness,
their plight gets lost in the clamor of the news cycle.

This imbalance of power. that has probably existed
since the first human communities began,
creates a disharmony in the universe.

It creates a sickness, as pervasive as the virus, from which we all suffer.
It causes whole societies to fail to thrive.
What is the vaccine for this disease?
It's not violence. It's not pointing fingers.
It is opening ourselves up to truth that so many people suffer
at the hands of those of us who have plenty.
And to let that truth chip away at our hearts and pry open our eyes
until we see the world as it is and feel the sadness and disharmony in our guts.
Navajo prayer
"The drum is broken. The hoe is still.
We have cheated the sun and betrayed the universe. This then is how we die."
Instead of the sickness and death that denial, blindness and betrayal bring
let us choose wholeness and life.
Because there is something much greater and more beautiful
to which we all are called –
a Kingdom that God would be proud of- HERE and NOW.