

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 7, 2015
St. Paul's - Peoria, IL
The Rev. Jenny Replogle

*O God, take our minds and think through them,
take our lips and speak through them,
and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.*

Growing up, I do not remember a time when I was told that my older sister was adopted and I was my parents' biological child. It was just a normal part of our lives. My parents would stress that how we each came to them was very special, and often they would say, "God makes family in many different ways." I think this came to mean more to me than it ever meant to them when they were saying it, and it has become a hope that I cling to, a promise of what God is doing in our world.

To be honest, as I looked over the readings for this week, I became a little jealous of Jonathan. He started out a sermon here on the beautiful Trinity. And this week, the readings are about sin - not just any sin but the fall and unforgivable sin. Great.

But the more I read and studied these passages, I realized that these two themes are not as separated as we may think. In the Trinity, we see that the very core and essence of God is love, belonging, and connection. We are made in the very image of God, so we know that we are made in the same way - that the very core and essence of who we are is made for connection, love, and belonging. We are made to live in relationship with God and with one another. It's what gives us purpose and meaning because it is how we are created to live.

And I don't know about you, but perfect fellowship with God and my family, friends, and neighbors is not how I would describe my daily life. And when I read the newspaper, it is pretty clear that God's dream for our world is not the current reality. At the core of our being, we were made for love and belonging, and yet it is far different from the life we awake to every morning. In today's readings, we explore why.

Our Genesis passage starts with an incredible line: "The man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze." How incredible does that sound? God comes along for a nice stroll as the sun is setting - and we are left to assume this is a normal daily activity. But this is occurring just after the man and woman have eaten from the tree which God told them not to eat from. And so they hide.

God calls to them and the man says he was afraid because he was naked. God asks if they ate from the tree. The man blames the woman. The woman blames the serpent. And things are never the same.

Now often we move on to the misinterpreted and misused curse to explain what has changed, but I'd like to look back because it's too important to miss.

God came to walk in the garden. After the man and woman had disobeyed. God knew what they had done, but God came to walk in the garden with them anyway. And the man and woman hide. So often, I have heard explanations of sin and the fall that say that we are so broken, so sinful that God cannot hear us or relate to us. But this story, which is our story, says that is not the case.

God comes to walk with us. Nothing we can do changes the immense love and desire of God to be present with us. But WE hide.

We don't even remember a time before knowing we had done something wrong. We were born into families and a world that is broken, and we have always known that we are broken, that something is not exactly right with us. And that shame, that thing that makes us fear we are not worthy of love and belonging, makes us believe that if we were fully known, we could not be loved. And in our shame, we blame others, and hurt them, damaging our relationships with each other as well.

But that voice of shame is wrong, and this is where we know it. God comes to walk with us, knowing fully who we are and what we have done. This is not to say that our brokenness does not matter. But our brokenness is not all that we are. We have still been made in the image of God. We are still the ones who God made and said that it was good. We are sinners and saints, broken and beautiful, scarred and holy.

And on and on throughout Scripture, regardless of what we have done, God comes to be us. And whether or not the walking in the first garden was figurative, in Jesus, God literally comes to walk with us.

In our story in Mark, we catch up with Jesus walking in our world, clearly full of the brokenness we know now.

Again, the beginning of the story tells us something important - the crowd around Jesus is pressing in so that he and his disciples cannot even eat. Jesus has been out healing people everywhere he goes. Those who can come on their own are following him, hoping to be healed of all that has wounded them. And shortly before this is the famous story of the friends who cut a hole in a roof so that they could lower their friend on his bed to Jesus. Those who are seeking healing for themselves and those they love are surrounding Jesus so much that they cannot eat.

But we also learn of others trying to get to him. First, his family comes to restrain him because people are saying that he has gone out of his mind, and even that he is possessed by not just demons, but the ruler of demons. I'm sure this was embarrassing to the family, but remember that in their day, there were no psychiatric hospitals or compassion for mental illness. If they could not get him home and restrain him, this was likely a death sentence. Even if they thought some of his ministry was good, this desire to bring him home until things calmed down was likely an act of love. They knew what could happen to him with these things being said - and because we know the rest of the story, we know they are right. Their actions seem to be full of a mix of shame and fear - and love.

And maybe, even more than the pictures of Mary holding Jesus, this story lets us know that Jesus was part of a real family. A family that was full of love and brokenness, and probably the place where Jesus learned, as we all do, the depth of how intertwined those two things are.

We were made for love and belonging. Often our family is where we know the deepest bonds of those connections. And because of that, it also becomes the place where we become most deeply aware of how deeply broken we are - and Jesus must have known this too.

Jesus' response to his family's request to see him is harsh. He asks "Who are my mother and my brothers?" and he looks around the table and responds "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Is Jesus just brushing off the bonds of family? At this moment, there is a distinct difference among those surrounding him - many in the crowd are pressing in to be healed, but his family is pressing in to hide him from those people. And Jesus, God walking among us, has not come to hide from us, in the beginning or then or now. God has come among us to heal us.

Jesus goes on to have even harsher words for those who suggest that his work is the work of demons. His words, "whoever blasphemes the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." To be honest, these words have struck fear in me since I was young. But we can only understand them in the context in which they were said. Jesus says this to those who are saying that his work of healing is actually evil. Like his family, they are in the crowd but they are not coming to Jesus for healing. Instead, they are focusing on what power he has, where that power is coming from, and by doing so, they are unable to see the good that is happening. They are not seeing the broken being made whole. It is not that Jesus would not heal them if they but asked - we know from other stories that he will. But as long as they are calling his healing evil, they cannot open their own broken hearts to the incredible grace that is pouring out in front of them.

This crowd pressing in around the table is full of different people, and I believe that we find ourselves in this story. We are in the crowd pressing up to see Jesus. But who are we in this crowd?

Are we trying to hide him? Are we afraid of what God among us may do among us? Sometimes I am. I am afraid of what God will do if I truly give every part of myself. Sometimes I avoid seeking God more because I am not sure that I want to do what God may ask of me. Are we as a church ready for whatever the Spirit may do in this community? Because I am sure that it will be far beyond what we can imagine.

Or are we the ones too busy talking *about* Jesus and debating how God works in our world? Sometimes we talk about God because our faith seeks better understanding, but sometimes we are talking about God because we are afraid to actually open the depths of our souls and minds and hearts to the healing that is right before us. Sometimes we see God at work in

our world and refuse to believe it because it does not fit into how God has worked in our own lives - and so we miss knowing God in a new way that will heal our souls.

Or are we the ones longing, aching, pressing in to reach out and touch the hem of the robe of this one who has brought healing we have never known? Are we coming with those who are aching and broken - who we have tried and tried to help but all efforts have come up short - are we gathered around them and bringing them to this one who we have heard can heal wounds no one has ever healed before?

Church, this is our job. This is who we are. This is where the wounded are made whole. It is here that we must know our own wounds and continue to look deep within our souls to the places that we are sure will keep us from knowing love and belonging. And it is we who are to reach out in our world and offer the promise that healing can be found, that nothing we have done or can do will ever keep this God who created us from longing to walk with us.

And we must ask ourselves - are we ready for what that will bring? Because this crowd will not be quietly filling pews, this crowd will be full of wounded people longing to be whole, pushing and pressing for the healing that is here.

Because this is a reality the world is longing to know. There are plenty of voices that will tell people that they are messed up, and there are plenty of voices that will tell them that really they are all okay, but we all know deeply that neither of these is the full truth. It is here that we have the freedom to admit that we are broken knowing that we are still worthy of love. It is here that we proclaim that the love that is healing our own hearts is available to everyone.

Today we are in that crowd and we gather around this table and reach out our hands for this same Jesus. Here, God joins us in the eternal fellowship of love and belonging that we were created for. Sometimes there will be healing for relationships we never thought possible, and sometimes there will be new bonds with people we never imagined that heal our souls in even deeper ways.

And in this mystery, the body and blood of Jesus become part of each of us, and week by week, day by day, we are made of the same body and blood which we share. And right here, before our very eyes, God will make family in many different and beautiful ways.