

Between Memory and Hope

The Gospel readings on the fifth, sixth and seventh Sundays after Easter – the last three Sundays of the Easter season -- are always from what Biblical scholars call Jesus' "Farewell Discourses." Mother's Day almost always falls on one of those Sundays. Maybe I relate to this text in a special way because I'm a mother myself. And this year Mother's Day is bittersweet for me and for a few of you out there as well. My mother died in January, and today is my first Mother's Day without my mother. I hear the motherly side of Jesus come out in these readings. Jesus pleads to God for the well-being of his disciples during his impending absence – much as a mother might plead for the care and protection of her children. Can't you just hear this prayer coming from the mouth of a devoted, faithful mother on behalf of her children? I can hear it coming from my mother: "I'm asking on their behalf...all mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me..."

About a year before my mother died, when she was 90, I asked her about dying. I asked her if she was ready to die, or if there was something she was waiting for. She said she wanted to see our son Andrew get better. Andrew, as I've mentioned before, suffered brain and whiplash injuries in a car accident in 2016. It has been a time for him when things have been suspended – suspended between memory and hope – suspended between the *memory* of full capacity to read and think, and the hope of when that capacity will be restored and he can move forward with his ambitious goals to study constitutional law.

Being suspended between memory and hope is just where we find ourselves in our church year today as well. This past Thursday was Ascension Day. According to St. Luke, Jesus leaves the disciples gaping into the stratosphere, wondering where he's gone and wondering how they're going to get along without him. Next Sunday is Pentecost, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. But in the meantime, here we are, in our liturgical year, left without the risen Christ and still waiting and praying for the promised Holy Spirit – the comforter who assures us of God's presence. And it's not unlike where you are as a congregation right now during this time of transition, this interim time as you discover who you are and what God is calling you to be. This period in the church's year the theologian Karl Barth once designated a "significant pause." It is a pause *between* the actions of God – a pause in which all the community can do is to wait and pray.¹

And that's true for others among us right now too. There are many of us living in a place like that today – a place where we are suspended between memory and hope. Suspended – between the *memory* of a marriage we thought was going to work, and the *hope* of a new life without that partner at our side. Between the *memory* of gainful employment and the *hope* of a new and fulfilling job. Between the *memory* of high school or college, and the *hope* of a new life, or a job, after commencement. Between the *memory* of good health and the *hope* of a hopeful prognosis. Between the *memory* of a loved one by our side and the *hope* that life can someday make sense again. Between the *memory* of plans to have children and the *hope* that someday the struggle with infertility will come to an end. Between the *memory* of when St. John's was something more than it is now, and the *hope* that it will be more again, as you engage the process of discovery and forge a path ahead to do what matters to God.

There is much about this Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost that mirrors much about our life – those times that are like a significant pause between the actions of God. Those times when it seems all we can do is to wait and pray.

When our son Andrew was a child he took piano lesson for a while. When he practiced, it seemed that one of the harder things for him to do was to observe the rests in the music. The times when the music indicates he is to take his hands off the keys and count the beats out until he should play again. He'd rather skip the rests or make them shorter than they're supposed to be. Sometimes I imagine you even have that problem in the choir. We could ask Liza. It occurs to me that these "significant pauses" in our lives are not unlike those rests in music. We often confuse those significant pauses with God's absence. But in music, those pauses are called rests.

The 19th century English writer and critic John Ruskin wrote a little piece expressing this idea. He called it "Inspirational Music Lessons." *There is no music in a rest, he wrote, but there is the making of music in it. In our whole life-melody the music is broken off here and there by rests, and we foolishly think we have come to the end of the theme. God uses a time of forced leisure, sickness, disappointed plans, frustrated efforts, that makes a sudden pause in the choral hymn of our lives; and we lament that our voices must be silent, and our part missing in the music which ever goes up to the ear of the Creator. How do musicians read the rest? See them beat the time with unvarying count and catch up the next note true and steady, as if no breaking place had come between.*

*Not without design does **God** conduct the music of our lives. Be it ours to learn the tune, and not to be dismayed at the rests. They are not to be slurred over, not to be omitted, not to destroy the melody, not to change the keynote. If we look up, God will actually beat the time for us. With the eye on the conductor, we shall strike the next note full and clear. If we sadly say to ourselves, "There is no music in a rest," let us not forget there is the **making** of music in it. The making of music is often a slow and painful process in this life. How patiently God works to teach. How long God is willing to wait for us to learn.ⁱⁱ*

There is something else that is quite significant about imaging God in this way, especially for busy mothers. When we picture God as the conductor who beats the time, even during the rests, mothers are more likely to give themselves permission to take the *Sabbath* rest they so sorely need in order to be good mothers. Most of us mothers tend to think we ourselves are the conductors, and so we don't let ourselves stop. I've heard busy mothers say more than once to me, "I can't sit down without feeling like I need to do something." When *God* is conducting, we can rest while the beat goes on.

We're given this day in the church year, this day of "significant pause," between Ascension and Pentecost, as a gift to remind us that God is beating the time – even through those challenging rests when we live suspended between memory and hope. Even when all we can do is wait and pray. And so today, we wait and we pray. And as we keep our eyes on the conductor, we trust that between memory and hope is the making of music.

Pastor Dana Runestad

May 13, 2018 ~ Mother's Day

Seventh Sunday of Easter (B)

John 17:6-19

ⁱ Reginald Fuller, *Preaching the Lectionary*, p. 93.

ⁱⁱ John Ruskin, adapted by Dana Runestad