

The Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
The Rev. Paula Jefferson
June 6, 2021

Where are you?

Back in the day, when commuting to work was a thing, I listened to KVIL on my way to the office. The DJ in those days, Ron Chapman, always led an entertaining conversation. But every now and then, he would introduce a new song that had caught his ear.

One morning, he played a song from Kathy Mattea's album "Willow in the Wind". The title is "Where've you been?" and the first verse reads like this:

Claire had all but given up,
When she and Edwin fell in love.
She touched his face and shook her head,
In disbelief, she sighed and said:
"In many dreams I've held you near,
"Now, at last, you're really here.

"Where've you been?"
"I've looked for you forever and a day."
"Where've you been?"
"I'm just not myself when you're away."

Pause

St. Martin's Human Flourishing course spent 10 weeks reading a book authored by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. The book is titled: *Not in God's Name*. In it, Sacks explores why followers of the three religions rooted in the Hebrew Torah (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) commit violence against one another.

To help us understand his point of view, he took us on a deep dive exploration of Torah....through the lens of Rabbinical scholarship. This is important because Torah is a Hebrew document. Rabbi Sacks began at the beginning...with the Creation story.

We *know* this scene... God walking through the garden on a breezy evening, Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit. They're in the garden, naked and afraid. God speaks first: "Where are you?"

Adam doesn't really answer God's question. He tells God that he's hiding, naked, and afraid. When God asks if Adam has eaten from the tree that he was told to avoid, the humans answer with plausible denial:

Adam says, 'Well, God, it's kind of your fault. After all, you gave me the Woman...she *gave* me the fruit'. And, now that the blame is rolling downhill toward Eve, she points the finger elsewhere, too. It's really the serpent's fault. The serpent told me to do it.

Pause

1600 years ago, St. Augustine read this same Creation story. In it, he heard an explanation for the human tendency to sin. He saw Adam and Eve's choice to eat the forbidden fruit as human kind's Original Sin. Henceforth, all humans would inherit the sin of Adam and Eve.

Original Sin is *one* of our Christian interpretation of the garden story. It is not the only one; and it is *not* the Jewish interpretation of the story...the people who recorded the story had something quite different in mind.

Human Flourishing taught us to look closely at Scripture and consider alternative interpretations.

God asks a question: Where are you?

On the surface, it seems like a silly question. God is walking close enough to the humans that they hear God's footsteps. Yet, God, the all-knowing, omnipotent Being, asks, "Where are you?". Adam assumes God is asking a geographic question: "We're hiding from you among the trees".

But what if God is asking "Where are you" in a different way...like the way Fr. Ron welcomes us to worship on Sunday Mornings: *Where* ever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome at this Table. This sort of "where" is not about a dot on a map...it's about proximity, or nearness, to God.

Pause

In his essay *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis talked about God's desire for us and our innate desire for God. We are drawn to search for God. Lewis says we sense the Divine, like the scent of a flower that we haven't seen--yet, we *know* it's there. It reminds me of the hopefulness in Claire's words before she meets Edwin: "I've looked for you for ever and a day".

But so often we try to fill our desire for God with stuff of our material world. Money, fame, career, competition, and every forbidden fruit...or vice...you can name. The stuff of this world cannot satiate our desire for God...for Love.

The Creation story is not really about the forbidden fruit...Every one of us will taste that fruit in one way or another. Rather, it is a story that tells us no matter how we respond to God, God's desire for us is unchanged. The choice to turn toward God, to really answer the question "where are you?", is always in our court.

Barbara Brown Taylor, another voice we read in human flourishing, says "sin is the choice to remain in a wrecked relationship with God or our neighbor."¹

Human Flourishing led us toward loving our neighbor differently. We took some hard looks at ourselves, at the social constructs of our culture. We acknowledged that we are in wrecked relationship with our neighbors. And then we began a journey toward flourishing.

We conclude this year of learning with allyship...or... relationship with God through God's people. Every person who has invested deeply in this program has been changed. We have seen our nakedness and our fear. And we know that flourishing, moving toward God's imagination for each of us, begins when we "center [our] lives on God, the source of everything that is true, good, and beautiful".²

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* p58

² Miroslav Volf *A Public Faith: how followers of Christ should serve the common good* p58

We learned about proximity. Throughout this academic year, we could only meet by Zoom. When the Human Flourishing journey began, we had some hurdles: Learning to use Zoom, having adequate internet speed to maintain stable calls, talking one person at a time.

We also learned that proximity has NOTHING to do with geographic location. People attended from their homes, offices, and vacations. On some nights we had people in Washington State *and* Washington DC. Community formed on our journey of faith...our journey into proximity.

Pause

Richard Rohr³ recently concluded a meditation series called “*An Evolving Faith*”. In his summary, he made two observations that stood out to me. First, “life and love are always cumulative, growing, and going *somewhere* that is always new and always more”. And Second, “The tipping point of faith is the threshold of spiritual energy, where what we believe becomes what we do. When that power is released, there is no stopping it, for love is a force that cannot be contained”.

At the end of this summer, Christian Formation at St. Martin’s is going to look different than it has looked in my 20+ years here. There will be formation between the 8am and 10:30am services every Sunday for *all* ages. There will be choices of learning paths. You will be able to attend in person, God willing, *and* you will be able to attend by Zoom, budget willing. There will be classes that intentionally invite inter-generational conversation. There will be lectures given by theologians who are not part of our community.

All of this is an invitation to journey more deeply into God’s life and God’s ongoing work of reconciliation in this world. As you enter summer, I invite you to a period of discernment. God is still asking, “Where are you”? What is your answer?

³ Richard Rohr Meditation: An Evolving Faith: Weekly Summary Saturday June 5th, 2021