

Today we round out the last installment in this starting back sermon series, and as we have looked forward through the changing of rhythms. We began our journey through examining the call of the morning bell, that draws our attention back into the present moment. Asking us not to focus on all the worry or swirling chaos that comes throughout life, but to be reminded to breath deep, trusting that God walks with us into each new day.

Then we moved as we reflected about the wisdom that comes through the great teacher, at whose knee we are all students. Terry taught us that we are called to sit at our desks ready to learn in community. Then last week we reflected together about how even when we wander or take a field trip, we are always invited back into the beloved community. That we too are invited to turn down the pages of life, pointing others to know where to look for the good parts.

And this week we close out our series, we turn to the principal of the matter.

And so, I asked this week on Social media, "If you were to describe the feeling of being sent to the principal's office in one word what would you choose and why?" I got a lot of responses and a lot of emotions, everything from nervous, to ashamed, to panic, to joy of getting out of class, to dread. I heard stories of trepidation, apprehension, confusion, and being downright scared. Some told me about the anxiety my question induced even though they have been out of school for years.

Growing up, I think the overwhelming majority of stories I heard about the principal's office had to do with discipline. Some talked about how it wasn't so much the fear of the principal but what Mom or Dad might say when they found out about the trip. I heard stories about kids who got paddled and spanked in the principal's office. No wonder the overarching feelings associated with it are strong ones and mostly hover around fear and dread!

I was told stories about how people were sent because they screwed up, in small and sometime large ways. These stories ranged from being disciplined because you were too slow to clean out a desk, to being told by the principal that her father had died, to having your dream of a protest moment squashed due to threats around not graduating.

What emotions or feeling does the principal's office bring up in you?

It is interesting to me the reactions that people have to this place of authority in the principal's office. It's this potentially scary, but not necessarily, place that most jump to the conclusion that it has to do with discipline.

Don't we too often do the same thing with God? We jump to think about how the same feelings that my question evoked by my question are also applied (sometimes consciously, sometimes not) to our image of God?

Too often in churches, we are left with a very boiled down, stripped out version of we are all just sinners in the hands of an angry god. We have been told we deserve this, that we should be scared because this angry deity is gonna smite us if we don't change our ways and follow the rules. We are left with this sad and hollow version of God, that can't see anyway out of the circumstances we find ourselves in but vengeance.

I think that much like the unfair or even childish view of the principal's office, we tend to think that this image of God is the one we need to believe in. Yet, that is not the Biblical story. Our biblical story pushes directly against this view of God.

The Bible is a collection of stories that people throughout history wrote down to teach each other about the type of God we worship. Even if you go all the way back to the beginning stories, these creation narratives were stories told in Babylon to a conquered people against the accounts of Babylonian creation stories. Their stories told people that your status in life told you if you were blessed by the Gods or not. Hence those Hebrew people who had been conquered and dragged far from their home, clearly didn't have the favor of the Gods. While the elite of the Babylonian empire clearly did.

With that context, consider again the creation narrative we have in Genesis chapter 1 & 2, where God creates *ex-nihilo*, out of nothing, and then creates a beautiful garden for God's creation to work in and flourish. You know the text, and the rhythm it establishes, that each new creation was created, "good." The heavens and the earth, declared good, the animals and the trees, created good, with humanity being chief among them as "very good." This kingly psalm, that serves as our text this morning, was most likely used and sung at coronations of the nation of Israel's kings, and would have been used to draw up that good creation to the heights of shared rule, as co-creators.

Yet, as most of us have lived, that garden didn't last, and then humanity was cast into exile, in the case of the context of much of the Hebrews scriptures, into Babylonian exile. Yet, we know that was not the intended end to the story, and those writers and the psalmists, proclaimed that true deliverance was not in the conquering of other nations but in their redemption. True leadership is leading with love, not fear.

This is what we know about the best principals in our world too. Those principals who understood the greater picture, that even when students needed discipline it should never be about striking down, but about building up. About inviting students to rise to the level necessary for human flourishing. That the best consequences are designed not to inflict pain, but to help us to learn.

The days of law driven discipline are over, and instead we see the luring love of Christ, the invitation to move forward in redemption, not fear, not guilt or dread, not terrifying or nervousness, not apprehension or shame. Our great principal, the judge we find in scripture, exemplified in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is one that returns to that first creation, that sees through the mistakes, the defensiveness, and takes the time to understand.

Much of Christianity teaches that the God of the Hebrew scriptures is somehow different from this love we see in Christ, but if you are a careful reader, and one who takes the time to learn from our shared heritage then you can come to see that Creator is the same as Christ.

Our God in the old testament, of the Hebrews scriptures, is a God of loving pursuit. God says okay, you didn't make the best choice, so you can no longer abide in this blessed garden, then I will go with you into the wilderness, and I will still call you out the wilderness, to a promised land of milk and honey.

This God even gives a law, a way of life, that will set you aside and will teach you the best possible way to live, and when you fail to do that, this God will deliver you again and again from your enemies. And even when you turn your back on this way of love, then I then too won't let you go. I will pursue you so lovingly that I will come down among you to show you not the letter of the law, but the heart of it. Or as the one writers of the gospels put it Jesus Christ came not to abolish law but to fulfill it.

The principle of the matter is that leadership, true leadership by a Principal, or by any other figure of authority, comes not from their willingness to strike out or to impose their will on the student or the world, but by their willingness to love. To take first a position of weakness to listen and to hear from those who have been stood upon or trampled by the world, to see beyond the lashing out of the student and look to the hurt inside each action of mischief or malcontent and to see that student's need and their hurt.

God looks beyond our mistakes, our past, our failures, our lack of accomplishments, our shame, and sees instead our humanity, our seed planted long ago in that fabled story of a garden, where God spoke into the void about how humanity was good, very good.

There have been a few times in my life where I have begun to feel this way. To feel the weight of a decision in such a way that I tried to do what I felt was best, and yet didn't want to have to make that decision. I remember a few years ago, it was February, which for Broadway has become a bit of a retreat month. Each different group within the church taking a weekend to retreat together. It was boy's retreat week, and we have about 15 young men signed up to head to St. Louis. It was the middle of the week, but the weather forecast came across my desk. Lots of snow, like a ton expected. I remember that it was sunny and sorta warm outside that day, and it seemed like that snow would never come. But I considered for a moment if I might have to cancel the retreat. I knew that rescheduling would be a nightmare and that we would likely never get the full group back together on another weekend.

I dreaded making that call, and I started to put it off. Then Columbia Public Schools announced that they were canceling school, and one more reason mounted. I remember the trembling in my heart, and that feeling of dread that I didn't want to take away the joy and the learning that I know was going to take place, but I could also see the writing on the wall. So I wrung my hands over the decision, but did finally decide to reschedule the trip. And sure enough, a lot of ice and

snow came and I was so thankful not to be out on the roads with them. And through it all, I had a new heart. I had a new heart for those who have to make that horrible call all the time for the schools. One where you never end up making everyone happy. Where you always manage to anger or alienate someone.

This week, my friend Phil, told me a story about when he was a superintendent of a school corporation in Michigan. He spoke about how one of his roles was to survey the neighborhoods to decide if it was going to be a snow day or not. He recounted to me how his own son had to deal with the frustration of his peers when most of the time, if he could deem it safe enough, that school would go on. "How come *your* dad never cancels school?" must have run in his ears.

I know that when I was a student, particularly in middle school, that I loved snow days. And I used to mutter awful things under my breath about whomever didn't cancel school whenever there was like a foot of snow on the ground and yet we still had school. As a child, my understanding of that was a sort of punishment. I imagined it was like being sent to the principal's office and being told that I did something wrong and now I had to write sentences on the blackboard or that I had to sit in detention during recess. It seemed like a great injustice.

Yet, now as I look back and especially as I listened to Phil tell me his story, my heart softened. He spoke of walking those icy sidewalks and driving around those snowy roads in his pickup truck, praying and thinking about the students who might not have a warm place to hold up, who might not eat today if they didn't get to school for the free and reduced breakfasts and lunches. Particularly in his urban school district, his heart would, rightly so, be on those student's scripture would call 'the least of these.'

His story demonstrates that true leadership doesn't think about those of us who are best served by snow days or time off, or those who want a day to goof off and go sledding. Instead, true leadership looks around to wield as our psalmist today says, the scepter of equity and the anointing oil of gladness, and the throne of grace. Phil knew that leadership, true leadership comes from taking the lead by living love. That the most important reason to make a decision thinking about the parts that really matter.

As I asked people this week for their stories of going to the principal's office, I was struck by one a friend of mine shared. She shared about how in 1977 she was sent to the principal's office and how the principal believed her. That even though she was sent for shoving a boy, that principal took the time and had the eyes to see beyond the action that brought her to him but to the reason she was there. That principal saw and listened, as no one else had, and validated her story, believing her that she had only shoved that boy because he had insisted on putting his hands down her shirt. When that principal asked for her story, he listened, truly listened to her. He didn't offer up excuses or turn away asking her "what did you do to encourage him?" or "well what were you wearing?"

This principal instead used his heart, to see the hurt inside my friend, and then he took action by suspending that boy, and even going to his parents to encourage them to seek therapy for

him. What validation from a true leader! That day he taught that young girl that no matter what that boy did or what others may want to do to her body without consent, it was never her fault.

Our Princi-PAL seeks to lead like this, Jesus drew in the dirt asking us not to cast stones, Jesus spoke to the woman at the well, when no one else would do it, Jesus reached into the marginalized of society and showed them love. This principal sought not to bring the paddle or to instill fear or trepidation. But shows us that authority comes from the size of the heart, not the size of the rule book.

Our Pinci-pal is one who knows our name, that extends forgiveness to us, that comes to sit alongside us not when we get it all figured out, but right now. Today. Our principal upholds the true kingly charge of this Psalm, one of steadfast love, and words of grace, ones of equity and love, one of mercies and of joy.

Words are feeble to express the great love and righteousness. God loves you so much, that God will pursue you, no matter where you go, or what you do, even if when you do get sent to the principal's office over and over again.

Thanks be to God. Amen.