

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
15 July 2018

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

2 Samuel 6: 1-11

Mark 6: 14-29

Strong from the Broken Places

“Ninety-nine times out of a hundred ‘why’ isn’t a real question. It is an expression of loss,” so states an opening paragraph in one of Jonathan Kellerman’s mystery novels about crime and death.

In my clinical residency at Spring Grove Psychiatric Hospital in Catonsville, we were taught never to ask therapy patients the question “why” about any of their feelings or actions or pathologies. If they knew “why” they wouldn’t need to be in therapy, right? In seminary a correct answer to “why” was usually “Jesus” or “love,” but was still equally futile in terms of productivity since theological or faith “whys” imply something about meaning greater than fact. And meaning is typically in the eyes of the beholder, or the believer. If one is a believing beholder/a person of faith, then meaning is critical because all questions of meaning...all “why” questions...are faith questions essentially. Meaning allows us to receive truth where we find it.



I also learned from Kellerman that there are five classifications of death: homicide, suicide, accident, natural causes and undetermined.

I really resisted the two lectionary passages for this week with their stories of the deaths of Uzzah and John the Baptist. Both stories hold significant space in the Bible, so there must be more to the story than just the story itself. Uzzah’s death occurred ostensibly because he broke the rule and touched the sacred and untouchable Ark of the Covenant in order to steady it/secure it. Why did that cause him to die? And then the New Testament story of the brutal death of John the Baptist, killed/beheaded again because of a rule (this one, personal) that Herod felt compelled to follow about keeping promises and saving face publically. Again, why? What is the meaning we might uncover in each. In neither case do I see the law or rule of Jesus or love being operative.

We can probably dismiss the death of Uzzah as some kind of accident, or ironically, coincidental collapse from natural causes at the moment of contact as being the interpretation lent to the event after the fact. I don’t believe God strikes people down for breaking rules...not even the judgmental God of the Old Testament.

And John the Baptist? Homicide, I suppose Kellerman would conclude...clearly...and a particularly gruesome one at that. From the perspective of crime investigation, one might look at

how he died...decapitation, by whose hand he died, and then assign blame. All the characters come into play: Herod, Herodias, and her child dancer-daughter, and the drunken party guests. When the question is asked from our *faith* perspective...our meaning vantage point...the questions shift and we have to attempt to engage the *meaning* of it all. The characters become less important and even the manner of his death recedes. John the Baptist is, after all, a pivotal figure in Biblical history and so we must start with that.

John the Baptist might be said to be the bridge between the Old and New Testaments. He is not the Messiah (Jesus) himself but important in that he proclaims the *coming* of the Messiah. He ushers in one who is not expected by the Old Testament but the one, nevertheless, who came to them. Why? Where is the meaning of that, we might ask? John the Baptist hails and anoints him by baptism in the Jordan River. In the midst of the unexpected and questionable Jesus and the miracles being performed by his disciples, even John the Baptist was, at one point, compelled to question Jesus about who he was. John was apparently abandoned in a jail cell while Jesus was out and about performing miracles ...healing lepers, giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. Surely Jesus could have rescued John from his plight. John sends one of the disciples to Jesus and asks, "Are you *really* the one who is the Messiah, or should we be looking for someone else?" In other words, he was confused and so frustrated with the situation and the perceived absence of expected response from Jesus to his personal suffering, that he questioned the very foundation of his ministry: Why is Jesus not doing something about what is happening to me? I'm the guy who heralded his coming. My faith is strong...if anyone should be rescued it should be me! Sound familiar?

We find the meaning that answers this "why" when we recognize that the story about John's beheading sits right in the middle of the ongoing story of Jesus' sending the disciples on a mission, and his welcoming them back while they tell their experiences of the success of their mission. Why? What is the meaning of inserting this grim story in the middle of a kind of victory story about the ongoing work of Jesus and of miracles being performed by his followers? It is a weird location for it since, chronologically, the death of John the Baptist occurred well before Jesus' sending out of the twelve. But there it is...a flashback of sorts. A reminder that even as life moves along in regular and rewarding ways, at any moment something may insert itself, and life must stop to assimilate it. Like the recent interruption to the lives of those people who went to work as usual at the Capital Gazette on a Thursday only to have terror inserted into a routine day. Or the 11 lives that captured the attention of the world when they suddenly were lost in the recesses of a cave filled with water...not to mention the 100 plus who put their plans on hold in response. Tuesday an Amber alert came over our cell phones and could be heard throughout the office. Two young people abducted in Gaithersburg. A bad surgical outcome, an unexpected death, a threatening diagnosis and, in that moment, these things all signal that something has broken.

When lives are broken like this...when things no longer function as God intended them in creation, it is cause for asking "why," not for the sake of getting an answer to the cause and method, or even the name of some sin that we would like to blame for generating the crisis (because of course we like to find that out so that we might find a way to exempt ourselves from possible replication)...Instead, we ask the "why" that begins the search for meaning. Because if the Biblical template holds...which I think it does for people of faith...God wants us to find

meaning from our brokenness. It is the key to redemption, which is what God is all about. Redemption and healing (which I'll talk about next week) and, ultimately, new life. "Sin is known by the suffering it causes," declares the classic spirituality of Julian of Norwich in *Revelations of Divine Love* from the 14th Century. But this is the 21st century, and now we have a need in Christianity for grasping the meaning of our lives. It's no longer working, I don't think, for us in the church to talk about and use of words like sin, or redemption, or even faith, unless we have fully internalized and integrated their meanings into our lives...unless we are able to put legs on what we profess by using those words. Put legs on our theology and doctrines; put legs on our religious language in the church.

James Fowler's 1981 publication of *Stages of Faith* suggests, "The great pity [is] that when faith is reduced to belief in creeds and doctrines, plenty of thoughtful people are going to decide that they no longer have faith." He was right, unfortunately as evidenced by the current declines in church memberships. For me, it highlights a reason we see so many people willingly...even enthusiastically...claiming to be spiritual but not religious. Life, with meaning, is a spiritual practice. Church/religion founded only in words and doctrines struggles because it does not necessarily meet people where they are...especially when we are suffering. I dislike it when people attach words like "sin" (too much) or "faith" (too little) to suffering. Even though it is a natural thing to do. Remember in the Bible when the disciples and Jesus came upon the man at the pool, and they ask Jesus, "Who sinned that this man was born blind?" Or the popular rhetoric of some preachers who say if you just have enough faith, things will go well for you.

I want to make it clear...whatever suffering...small or great (pending death, current pain, losses, injustices—you name it—you are enduring today...it is NOT a punishment for a sin you committed and it is not because your faith is not strong enough. God does not work like that. If you are going to dwell on the "why" of your situation, dwell on the meaning of what is happening in your life so that you can participate in its redemption. Things break. Lives break. Relationships break. We live in an imperfect world. And where there is brokenness there is possibility and opportunity...possibility and opportunity for transformation in ourselves into what God intended in creation.

Pay close attention to your suffering and get everything you can out of it; for ultimately it will make you a better, stronger person.

This is not an easy process. In fact, it is counter intuitive to see crisis and brokenness as anything but tragic and the beginning of the end. But it doesn't have to be that way. Even as such, it can be opportunity.

Erwin McManus, in the book *The Barbarian Way*, explains Jesus' response to John the Baptist's question about why he doesn't get him out of prison, and out of his suffering state. Jesus says, "Blessed is the one that does not fall away on account of me." In other words, blessed are the ones who continue to hold fast to their faith even when it seems that what God is doing (or not doing) is ludicrous or unfair. The point in John's situation is that Jesus knows exactly what John's predicament is...knows what our circumstances and sufferings are right now...and also knows their ultimate meaning, and holds the bigger picture for us.

Each of us is unique...and there will be different scenarios for each of us. Therefore, just because some appear to be rescued and others do not, doesn't mean that the unrescued are unloved or unblessed. Let God be God. That's our faith challenge. David Jeremiah tells a story about sitting at the table with John Wooden, legendary UCLA coach, who coached famous basketball players Bill Walton and Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar). David Jeremiah said to Wooden, "I've heard criticisms that you treated Walton and Alcindor differently than the other players; that you didn't treat them the same as the others; that you weren't fair." Wooden said to Jeremiah, "Don't ever confuse treating people the same with treating people fairly."

God is always fair and just, even when our individual treatment does not appear the same. We are all different with different gifts and different calls and asked to live our lives in different ways. When we break, which is always going to happen at some point, because brokenness is inevitable, the opportunities for healing are varied and endless...and always in God's careful care.

I want to close with an image from the Japanese art form called "Kintsugi." It relies upon broken things for its beauty, valuing the broken pieces of something by enhancing their cracks and shapes with gold. Instead of tossing a bowl or plate that has been broken, they bring it together in a new way by gluing with the gold such that the new piece has greater value and beauty than it did before it broke. It looks like this:

This is the best image I could find for what God does with us and our lives when we break. Julian of Norwich says brokenness is known by the suffering it causes. I believe and would rather envision brokenness from the spiritual perspective, and say that brokenness is best known and understood by the good that God is able to bring from it.

