

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church & Neighborhood House  
September 13, 2009

On the road to Jerusalem....  
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“When God is going to do something wonderful, He or She always starts with a hardship. When God is going to do something amazing, He or She starts with an impossibility.”

So states Ann LaMott in Chapter 3 of her book Plan B Further Thoughts on Faith. It's in a chapter in which she talks about the reunion of her young son with the father who let before his birth. It's a story that realistically describes that which seems so improbable - that one could walk away from a child, especially an unborn child - because of the responsibility and restrictions that raising a child involves. It seems that a higher order of some kind should be in effect to stop such things from happening.

And yet, such things are complex and not easily understood, especially since they unleash constellations of confusion and hurt, resentments and fear, anger and, yes, even hatred.

Still, in Ann's case, she somehow carefully managed not to allow the disappointments in her relationship to cascade into the life of her son. She always kept in mind that her son might one day wish to know his father, and when the time came, to make the arrangements for that to happen.

Such elevated thought and emotional balance challenges the simplistic naiveté that suggests human actions and interactions can simply be categorized as good or bad, with one party being wrong and the other party being the wronged. Those bookends exist, surely, but with many stories in between.

When it becomes possible to rise over the hurt and disappointment of such things, one discovers the greatness of soul, displaying its deepness and resolve, nurtured by a faith that uncovers the tip of serenity, enough so that we come to believe we will make it through. In other words, that we will be ok.

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In Ann's case, the reunion of son and father, became the reunion of family...out of hardship came what was at one time - the implausible.

I've been thinking quite a bit about “family,” lately - especially in the broader terms of how we come together here, at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House

in all the ways we gather, with the many groups that call this “home.” The list of those who attend to their missions here is impressive: - The Homeless Outreach Advocacy Program, which is a mission of this church, and, of course, our tenants, which include The Carter Burden Center, the International Pre-School, the 45 or so 12 step programs that meet here weekly, the outreach dinners with our community partners, the exercise and physical discipline groups, and this, our Sunday worship...the focal point of it all.

It is from here that the difference in signage sets us apart, for the name on the front of this building does not say Jan Hus Community Center and Neighborhood House, but Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House. In all the ways we are and in the ways we are to others who join us in this space -- we are part of the great mystery of faith that has provided for us since 1888. We are part of a living and eternal mystery that time and again has produced wonder and amazement out of hardships, impossibility, and more.

We know this in our own lives, if we have been around long enough. And it is true here.

Think it's not true? Just come hang out here during the day sometime and watch and listen. Trust me, before long you will be wondering how all that happens here does -- and you will be amazed and touched by this place in the universe that is so filled with God and faith.

A short conversation with a friend who comes in off the street for support or a member of the community who comes here for lunch will reach deeply inside of you, stirring your own gratitude for being part of this mission and for the way in which God is, simply and wonderfully is.

And God is...well, everywhere. And when we hold hands with God, as we know God, we travel in ways beyond the imagination.

I recited this morning's reading from Hebrews a week ago Friday in Nashville at the More Light Presbyterians National Conference. More Light Presbyterians (MLP) is one of the leading groups in the progressive movement in the PC(USA) seeking full inclusion and equal treatment from marriage to ordination for LGBT folks. The reading was followed by a sermon offered by Rev. Debra Peevey, a minister in the Disciples of Christ denomination and former member of the PC(USA). Debra was the outreach organizer for our recent effort to ratify an amendment that would have removed restrictions in the PC(USA) that are used to exclude LGBT folk from the work and worship of the church and same gender loving marriages, for example.

In preparing for the worship service in Nashville and, later, in listening to Debra's talk, I kept thinking about what it was that draws us here, or there, or to any place seeking respite and healing from the hardships and seemingly “impossibilities” in our lives. Why do we come to...

Church, for example? Aren't churches supposed to be blasé blasé, as they say? Even more - why seek God in the first place? We hear the arguments all the time about how God "doesn't work." You know, the stuff about theodicy. "Why do bad things happen to good people." Or the unanswered prayers. Or the idea that churches and God are only for perfect people, holy people, certainly not ordained women (in some denominations) or full welcoming for LGBT folk (in most denominations) or that churches might even be places where the realities of social change are considered as an emerging gospel.

After all, church is about one way to believe, isn't it -- and if you don't, you're out. Of course that is not true here, none of it. But there are reminders that we are, well, a bit different.

For all it's wonder and welcoming, a church I was at recently had an invitation to Holy Communion - limited to all those baptized in the name of Christ. I kept thinking to myself, Jesus fed people. Period. In the mystery of that sharing a supper or a meal set in memory of him, all are welcome who wish to join us. The day I am required to turn away anyone who wishes to -- from joining us at this table and this meal...will be the day I set aside my ordination.

So, we are called here. Why? How? Who knows? And, I am not going to be one that messes with that. Why do streams of people in need, one after the other keep coming here for help for nurturing, for companionship, and food - spiritual and otherwise? And why do we and others like MLP keep on keeping on....

Why...why...why...because of who we are.

And who is that? In Mark's lectionary reading for today, Jesus asks the famous question of his disciples..."who do you say I am?"

And that's the point, we are what we believe in and how our actions reflect those beliefs. Faith we have that God will take care of the rest. Such faith is fundamental to the belief that we are one family, divided and far flung as we may sometimes be -- we are, nonetheless, one in the God who said to Moses, "I Am" in the answer to who God was.

I Am, not here or there - but everywhere. "Am." First person, singular, present indicative form of the verb "to be." Present, everywhere, enduring...always with us. In that I place - I enter, in that "I Am" my faith resides. And, in that simple truth evident in all creation, whether seen or unseen, we are family. We are one. And, here, we practice such a way of being. Simple. Elegant. Cosmic...and then some. It is truth...

And whether such truth of faith in the world comes to us via the evidence of Hebrews...unfolding over thousands of years...from the Red Sea to the Walls of Jericho to Rahab, David, Samuel and Jesus...

Or whether it captures us in the moment of clarity, that surprising moment of faith unfolding before us in its preferred unpredictable ways, it will capture us, affirm us,

comfort us and other if we are simply present to God in the world around us, not seeking what we need for ourselves - but in being present and willing so as to better serve to others.

On Friday, I had the privilege of being part of a remembrance of 9/11 with our friends at Carter Burden as a representative of Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House. For most of us, it was not an easy day, punctuated by some very difficult moments.

As the luncheon went on and the remembrances were made, I suddenly realized just how hopeful being with the elders in our community made me feel. Yes, they were present for the attack of 9/11 and they too felt the shock that intensely pummeled us in its aftermath. But, in reality, in their lifetimes, many had seen or felt worse. In their lifetimes, they had been through hardships and the seemingly impossible and had not lost their spirit, their willingness and need to be together in family, and their sense of service.

In their own ways, they had shut the mouths of lions, and quenched raging fires, and sent foreign armies to flight...

And today, for many of them, the simple presence of another, a friend, a companion for lunch or conversation, becomes the highlight of their day. Are they so different than you or me or anyone who may come here. And, as to why they do show up here - simple, it is because we are here for them, and if we are wise enough, we will discover that they are here for us, as well. The two gathered and the "I Am" of God present - forms a union of service, fellowship, and faith that will heal all who come to such a meal.

Just as God called Jesus to Jerusalem, and he listened and acted - knowing that what seemed impossible was ahead, God calls us, knowing that we will not always find it easy. Putting us in the company and joy of one another for the journey. Looking to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of the faith. He knew the joy, in spite of the difficulty.

And, the joy is always there, as it must be in people of faith, for it joy that sustains us, not a silly or giddy joy, but a solid and rooted joy of knowing that no matter what we face on this surface that we travel, God is with us in this family we share.

It may be as simple as God saying, "Just show up. Give one another a break and little love, and I'll take care of the rest."

Amazing and Wonderful.

And true...