

Sermon
The Sixth Sunday After Pentecost
July 9th, 2023
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: GENESIS 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; PSALM 45:11-18; ROMANS 7:15-25A;
MATTHEW 11:16-19, 25-30

I learned a new word this week: tensegrity. It's a combination of the words "tension" and "integrity". It's an architectural term used to describe the incredibly stable nature of the structures that can be built by holding competing forces together while respecting their integrities. Theologian Mary Elizabeth Hess uses it to describe what it is to be a person of faith living in today's world.

We are, in our faith, consistently holding opposite things in tension: faith and doubt, joy and sorrow, lament and praise. We hold the way of Jesus, the way of the Gospel in tension with the way of our society, our world. It is the place between that we find God's grace. As followers of the way of Jesus we are called to live with integrity in the midst of tension...tensegrity...

Last week, Gary preached about brokenness, and our frequent rush to put the pieces back together, inviting us to see that as Leonard Cohen says in "Anthem", that there is a crack in everything, and that's where the light gets in. We might want to force those pieces back together, but it is in the place between that we find God's light, and grace, and love.

We are invited to think about "tensegrity" – tension and integrity – in our readings this morning, and indeed through all Scripture: Scripture is full of contradictions that draw us into a place of tension. Places that can be difficult to stand. Places where we feel a pull to one or other extreme, but where we will find grace, and integrity if we are willing to stay just a little longer in that place of tension.

Our passage from Romans is a difficult one, particularly the verse suggesting that nothing good dwells in us. While we might not share Paul's understanding of sin as a force possessing us, there is an important opportunity in this passage to acknowledge sin. There is darkness in our world. There are strong

forces pulling us, but God is with us in that “pull”. God is with us when we experience what Paul expresses in the verses:

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”

There is “tensegrity” – tension and integrity – in this admission, and Jesus tells us – and shows us – that there is grace and love here, too. Leonard Cohen’s words again this week, again from “Anthem”: “...forget your perfect offering, there’s a crack, a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in”. God is not looking for our perfect offering. God is asking for our willingness to acknowledge the crack in everything – in ourselves, and throughout all of creation.

Acknowledging cracks, brokenness, and opposing forces in ourselves is difficult. It’s difficult to stand in those places of opposition in our world, but God is there, with us, in those places, shining light, and love. God is asking us participate in this life, this world with “tensegrity”, feeling light and love in the midst of opposing forces in ourselves and bringing that light and love in the midst of opposition and conflict in our world.

As many of you know, I spent a week in Calgary at the Anglican Church of Canada’s General Synod. I experienced many moments of tension between opposing forces in those 6 days! I experienced moments of profound weariness, too, not only in 13 hour days, but in the tension of opposing views, and so these well-known verses in our Gospel passage this morning were resonant indeed after my General Synod experience:

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

If we are to walk a Gospel walk, a walk of integrity in midst of tension and opposition we need what Jesus is inviting us into here.

Eugene Peterson’s interpretation of these verses is helpful:

²⁸⁻³⁰ “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

The unforced rhythms of grace. It is in learning and practicing the unforced rhythm of grace that we can live with “tensegrity”. While it is always helpful to think about sabbath, and rest, it is less helpful to place sabbath and living and working in opposition. We all need rest – to go away to a quiet place and rest awhile – but the unforced rhythm of grace is a way of being that eases the burden of the tensions and opposition in our lives all the time.

Jesus says “...learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart....for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” It’s helpful to consider the word that is often translated as “easy”. It’s probably better translated as “good” or “kind”. And so the yoke that Jesus invites us to take upon us is one of kindness, and goodness. It is a yoke that invites to walk in a rhythm of unforced grace that has us hold the burdens of this life with humility and kindness. We live with tensegrity – with integrity in the midst of tension – when we adopt a posture, a rhythm, a way of humility and kindness.

Humility challenges us. It can cause tension in us, as we resist it. Two weeks ago I offered you the platinum rule: do unto others as they would have you do unto them, and the phrase “Everyone is you, living a different life. Treat them as such.” Living this requires humility. It requires suspending our notions that we’ve got it all figured out and don’t need another perspective. It requires an unforced rhythm of grace that is open to potential and possibility in our encounters with one another and our world. I saw the beginnings of a yoke of humility and a rhythm of grace in how the work of Sacred Circle and the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples (ACIP) was received at General Synod, and I give thanks for that. Indigenous Archbishop Chris Harper stressed that we need to walk together. We do that by walking with humility and grace and with gentleness and kindness.

In my reflection on General Synod in the newsletter I wrote about the wider structure and framework that holds us as Anglicans, as we participate in

God's mission starting here, at our beloved Church of the Ascension. Sometimes the way that structure holds us does feel restrictive and inhibiting. Sometimes that yoke of connection with the wider church might feel like it is increasing our burden rather than making it lighter. While I did feel some of that at General Synod, I have come away with an even stronger conviction that it's not about doing away with the structure and framework, but rather about how we inhabit it. As I have said before, power isn't, in itself, wrong, but we are asked to be aware of power and how it is used. We are asked to face abuse of power and to resist it non-violently. We are asked to walk with humility, and an unforced rhythm of grace within the structures and frameworks in our Anglican Church and in our world. Bishop Shane did that when he spoke so eloquently in favour of the resolution to change the threshold for required votes by Orders. This resolution makes way for the unforced rhythm of grace in the midst of opposing forces by addressing the possibility in our current voting process that a very small minority in any Order can block a change.

Tensegrity - integrity in the midst of tension – is possible. It is God that makes it possible, and we make it possible when we join with God and live out God's mission with humility and kindness and compassion. I pray that we will all leave here this morning having found rest and refreshment in the song and prayer and sacrament we share in community, and I pray that we will take with us a deep and lasting refreshment that is found in living with the unforced rhythm of grace, and a posture and movement of gentleness, kindness and compassion. May we live with "tensegrity" – with integrity in the midst of tension – today and every day, In Jesus name. Amen.