

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
April 22, 2007

*People of The Way*  
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There is a story called *The Bridge* that I use with students in the beginning of the new school year. It's by Edwin Freidman in a book called Freidman's Fables.

It's about a person who has finally made up their mind what they want to do with their life. At last, it is clear. They know. And, off they go to their destination. While crossing a bridge, stranger approaches, greets the individual on the path to destiny; hands them the end of a rope, and proceeds to jump off the bridge, careening the unsuspecting one to the railing of the bridge, holding the stranger who is now dangling over its side.

Now, this bridge is constructed in such a way that there is no where to tie the rope – and the rope is of such a length that there is no way to raise the jumper, without the jumper's help – which they refuse to give.

In response to the stunned person holding the rope as to why the stranger is doing this, the only answer given is that the stranger is now the responsibility of the individual on the bridge. "My life is in your hands," states the one dangling at rope's end.

Time passes. Frustration mounts. The kids ask all sorts of questions: "Does he have a cell phone to call for help?" A brave new world, indeed!

Eventually, the person on the bridge comes up with a plan: if the stranger will help, it just may work to get the jumper back onto the bridge. But the jumper refuses, insisting the individual hold on to the rope: "I am your responsibility. If you let go I will die!"

Finally, the person on the bridge, realizing that to hold on means they will miss their appointment with their newly discovered destiny, says, "If you choose not to help, I will have to let go." After a few moments of "No, no! I am your responsibility. You can not let go," and any willingness on the part of the jumper to help – the one on the bridge says, "I accept your decision."

In the classroom, we segue into a discussion of how we all start out a new school year with the best of intentions: going to come to class every day, do all our homework, be prepared every day – but for many of the kids I teach, by the middle of the year they are stuck. They get stuck in the middle of the bridge, holding onto some of the same old behaviors and groups of individuals that have caused them difficulty in the past – preventing them from accomplishing the goals they truly want to achieve.

I thought of this story as I read Acts of the Apostles for today's service. Saul from Tarsus, on the path to persecuting the early followers of Jesus suddenly has a conversion experience. One minute he is a persecutor – and in the next instant his staggering catharsis causes him to let go of everything he has ever known and held onto – converting him into a new person: a twice born individual, setting his face on a totally new path, illuminated by the presence of Jesus in his life.

In this passage of the scripture, it is the first time that the movement of the early followers of Jesus is referred to as “The Way.” It's in the second verse; Saul has asked for letters from the high priest for permission to bring any he may find who belonged to the Way, bound to Jerusalem for punishment.

It was a somewhat informal term that acknowledged there were these people who were living a certain way, “Oh, you know them – they're that way.”

Last night, I attended the performance of Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice. It was an exceptional performance, as evidenced by Savannah's recital this morning. What a talented young performer she and the other cast members are. However, I find this to be the play of Shakespeare's that I least enjoy. I want to rewrite it, removing the hateful and stereotypical behavior of Christians and Jews towards one another, in the same way I want to rewrite Huckleberry Finn to all remove the n-word references. I know. I'm a literary heathen; I admit it!

The show's program states that at the time Shakespeare wrote Merchant of Venice that there lived no Jews in England and that Shakespeare probably never knew a person of the Jewish faith. There are some who say Shakespeare wrote it intentionally to highlight the exclusion of those who were alien in the society of the day. Perhaps that is true. Still, it casts a vulgar light on the way we treat each other – until something changes. It may be that that is what is hardest for me in the play – there is no real transformation of the characters. The dominant society wins again, even when the one who is alien has been just as wronged by them, as they ever were by him.

If there were no real transformation in the ministry and teachings of Jesus and other great prophets and religious leaders – what difference would they make? What difference would it make to us? What was it that did make the difference in the spiritual way left us by the Jewish itinerant preacher and rabbi of Palestine named Jesus?

In other versions, Paul states that Jesus was revealed to him, suggestion less of an outward appearance and more of a psycho-spiritual change. “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Suddenly Saul knew - knew that he could no longer live – that way.

He, who had hated Jesus' followers, now became one of his most powerful supporters. Saul, who had been filled with rage and hate toward the Jews that followed Jesus had now transformed into Paul, filled with the message of the Good News. He who had been consumed with hate is now the one whose words to the Corinthians are oft quoted at marriage ceremonies:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

“Saul,” might his former friends have said, “is that you?!”

Love, like mercy, rains down from heaven. During a week, such as the one that has passed with the unthinkable devastation in Virginia, the continued and mounting loss of life in Iraq, and all things big and small in our lives that sometimes cause us to lower our heads a bit, walk a little more slowly, feel more tired and even a bit older... we come back to The Way. We return to our faith, as we may have faith, relying on it a bit more, even as we question it. It is the Way, for us, to see beyond what is at our fingertips, knowing that mercy and love, faith and hope –these are the spiritual gifts we carry with us as we move into the uncertainty of our days, the uncertainty that Paul knew as he ventured into his new life.

When in this morning’s second reading of John, Jesus says, “Do you love me?” he might well have said, “Do you trust in me?” Sometimes, I think it is trust that moves me into action more than love.

And, so, the choice on the path of transforming for the ever-reforming has to include to letting go of the things that hold us back and frighten us into immobilization. I do not think there is any way out of fear except through faith and trust and the practice of mercy and forgiveness, love, compassion – as Jesus taught us to do.

There is no place for us in the middle of the bridge that can for long be tolerated. We are called to a different way of living, a different way of seeing the world and those in and around it, embodied with the grace and forgiveness of others – the same grace and forgiveness that we seek for ourselves.

It the way we are and try our best to be.

Amen.