

Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
August 12, 2018

Proverbs 1:1-5; Eph 4:11-16; I Cor 13:10-12, I Cor 3:2-8; 2 Peter 1:5-8

Maturity Leave

So, it was several months back, an e-mail exchange with a former parishioner, someone who from time to time writes me to catch me up on his life. His pastor was just returning, he said, from a "Maturity Leave." I don't know if it was autocorrect, or if he just mistyped -- because of course it was a *maternity leave* -- but the phrase, his phrase, made me chuckle. "I will have to use that as a sermon title some day," the preacher thought to herself.

So first of all, a disclaimer: I am not aiming this reflection this morning at any one in particular. But if I were, it would be moi. Because let's be honest, couldn't we all use a little more maturity?

I have to say *maturity* is not my favorite word. I think it was poisoned for me by a middle school teacher, who frequently exhorted us, her students, to be "more mature." That's the way she pronounced it...mature...with just that tone too. And in truth, it was likely aimed my way with some frequency because back in those days I had a tendency in class to get the giggles. Giggling wasn't mature. Passing notes wasn't mature. Flirting wasn't mature. In short, the way she said it...mature didn't sound very *fun*. It didn't sound like something you'd particularly want to strive for or want to *be*.

This summer, however, I was in an interesting conversation with someone, where we got to talking what our particular brand of Christianity tends to emphasize, and what it leaves off. In the UCC, the United Church of Christ, we emphasize the extravagant love of God. We emphasize inclusion, and social justice. We emphasize the goodness of God, the goodness of creation, and our need to partner with one another to care for God's good creation. We do not so much emphasize *sanctification*, which is to say living a godly life, or a holy life, or being transformed into the likeness of Christ. In our tradition, we do not so much emphasize spiritual maturity. So perhaps this morning is an attempt to correct that, to deal with this important part of our faith.

This morning, rather than having one scripture, we have several. And I've asked five of our deacons to help in reading the scriptures today.

Now I hope you aren't overwhelmed with so many passages, medley helps us see that our growth in faith and in spiritual maturity is indeed part of the biblical record.

It surely is in the stories of the bible (think of Joseph and his brothers and all that jealousy) and also there in Jesus various encounters with people, but perhaps nowhere is it seen more strongly than in the epistles, the letters written to the fledgling churches as they sought to live out together the life of Christ.

Because of course they didn't always get it right. Because of course being human they had disagreements and dissension among them. The letters are rooted in the very human tendencies we all have...to not be mature, to give ourselves over from time to time to judgment, to rivalry, to intolerance and dismissal.

One of the things I often do when meeting with couples to be married is give them an inventory, a series of statements that they answer that helps us in our discussions. One of the statements says "I believe that conflict is a necessary part of relationship." It always makes for interesting discussion. I also read them this statement, from a resource on relationships that was shared with me by Reverend Rosemary MacKay: *"The perfect mate is someone who will challenge the prejudices you have come to love, and who will evoke the gifts you are afraid to claim. The perfect mate, the one whose love will last and last, is one who will challenge, not the prejudices we have come to despise, but the ones we have come to love. And he or she will evoke those buried gifts we are afraid to admit even to ourselves."* See, one of the things we want to reflect on in pre-marriage counseling is how we are not fixed entities. We become someone in our relationships, and hopefully --when we evoke the best from each other-- that someone is a finer, more mature self.

This week we had our first book discussion of the book *I am Proud of You: My Friendship with Fred Rogers*. In it, journalist Tim Madigan shares how privileged he was to have a close friendship with Fred Rogers. Fred helped Tim through some rough patches. He helped mend the often tense relationship Tim had with his father. And he helped Tim come to terms with the death of someone very dear. From time to time, our conversation this week moved to the movie about Fred that came out this summer, which did such a great job of showing how Fred was very intentional in taking certain subjects on. Human Differences. Race. The Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. September 11th.

At one point I asked the group "If Fred Rogers could come back to do a show that addressed one thing what would you wish that topic to be?"

Here were our answers:

Civility.

Forgiveness.

Multicultural Realities or On Understanding Differences

On Not Being Judgmental

Being Quiet

Gaining Perspective Acceptance and Tolerance

When we commented on how many of these had to do with not rushing to judgment, but taking time to listen, someone said "It's important to realize that everyone has their back story" I wonder how different our human interactions (and sometimes our feelings about our own lives and our life work) I wonder how different these might be if we regularly reminded ourselves of this, and worked to listen and understand how that is so. Everyone has their back story.

This week also was a week in which someone known to many TV baseball announcer Jerry Remy let it be known that he was once again struggling with cancer. This is I think his sixth or maybe seventh time since his initial diagnosis and in the games this week you could see all kinds of signs in the stands of people sharing encouragement with him. We love you Jerry. Come back soon Rem Dawg. You got this.

What it got me to thinking about was what a life Jerry Remy has had. A great career as a ball player. A great career as an announcer. But also the terrible reality of having a son who murdered his wife, leaving their grandchild in the end without both parents. I remember my mother -- who was an ardent Sox fan -- saying in the aftermath of all that that she thought Jerry Remy should step down...that people would always think of what had happened, that it was bringing the tragic into that which is Americas pastime.

But Jerry Remy is smart, and funny, and he loves being a commentator, and he did not give it up. His continuing on is for many people a source of inspiration, and proof that we are not defined by any one thing that happens in our life, or in our family's life. We are always more, much more than the worst thing.

This week, today in fact, also marks the one year anniversary of the Alt Right rally (white supremacists and neo Nazis) in Charlottesville that resulted in the death of a young woman when someone plowed their car into a group of counter protestors. Again, we might say why remember that? Why lift that up in worship? But it is part of our national discourse, this uneasy relationship we have around race. This week marked much discussion around a young woman, a person of color, being questioned on her own college campus for eating her lunch there. There were many interesting editorials in the paper in response -- Many suggesting that unless you have regularly experienced the micro aggressions that come with being a person of color you might not want to say too quickly that too much is being made of this.

Does our spiritual growth, our maturity, lead us to patience with these often difficult thorny uncomfortable topics that are part of American life? I believe it to be so. We are not called into the sanctuary to be apart from life out there. We are called into worship to gain perspective on life out there, to find encouragement to be about our

own spiritual growth *and* to put our energies too into a better life for others in this world.

We are living in times that seem to be getting ever more heated. But we still have choice about how we are going to live. We can respond by laying blame upon a person, a leader, a political party. We can disparage the person who has criticized us. Or we can look within. How is our own response to the news or to another person in our life helping or hindering peace? If we steep ourselves in angry rhetoric, we are likely to begin to speak it ourselves. If we avoid anything political all together, we are likely to have made our faith a personal and private thing only.

This is the line preachers walk today, but it is also the line each of you walk. We may be living in troubling times, but what are we doing to cultivate a spirit that is loving, and hopeful, a spirit that tries to avoid the rush to judgment a spirit that does not categorize people or dismiss people A spirit that holds with humility this awareness that we are all of us a mixed bag, all of us having too a back story. What are we doing, each of us, to cultivate a spirit of greater spiritual maturity?

You may leave here today wanting to give further thought to this. I hope you will! I myself plan to sit with this cover image, the seed that is sprouting and think about where I need further cultivation of spiritual richness, depth, maturity. As with many things, it is always best when we begin with ourselves.

We might also hold on to this, words shared by writer Anne Lamott (and I know I have quoted this often) "God loves you just as you are...and God loves you too much to let you stay that way."

As we pray for our own spiritual maturity, as we seek to work out our own salvation with diligence, may we always be aware of God's amazing and transformative love. May it be the fertile ground from which our growth comes.

Amen.