

Making Visible the Invisible

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In 2013, I was visiting an indigenous community in Thunder Bay, Ontario. I was there with a friend, Mike Green, to facilitate an asset-based community development training. Before our session started, one of the elders set the context for the day. He said, “We aren’t here to build community, we are here to remember it!” It took me about six months to digest the words of that elder. I realized he was helping us to reconnect the body.

At Broadway United Methodist in Indianapolis, we have a tradition once a year that reminds us to remember our baptism. The ritual reminds us that we are the body of Christ. This tradition is not an Easter tradition but a libation. It happens well after Pentecost in the summer. It’s one of my favorite traditions because it’s a reminder—as humans, as Christians, and as beloved children of God—of how to live as if the gospel is true. One of my closest friends, the Reverend Mike Mather (former pastor of Broadway UMC) would help us to remember our baptism. He would take a pitcher of cold water and splash us with it. As we braced ourselves for the shower we would laugh with the excitement of children, sometimes hide behind our friends in the pews as if it was a game on a playground, as though for only a moment we became as children. There was no alter call or reminder of what great sinners we were, nor how inadequate we were the other six days of the week. Instead we were all reminded that our lives are abundant. In the words of the poet Mary Oliver, in her *Instructions for Living a Life*, our call is to “pay attention, to be astonished, and to tell about it.”

The eschatology of the gospel also reminds us that we are to be witness of where God is working in the world and celebrate our brothers and sisters. It tells us that the crosses we carry aren’t unnoticed and that we are to lift up and celebrate people who may not always be seen. Before and after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the gospel offers powerful examples. In Acts of the Apostles, Peter and John help us to reflect how we religious leaders so often miss the boat with the traditions of our religious institutions. The scriptures give us practices that help us pay attention deeply. When Peter and John approached the lame man, it says that they “saw” the man—they intentionally *looked* at him. At the end of the passage, it tells us that the whole congregation recognized the man and knew him as the formerly lame beggar from birth.

What does it mean to *recognize*? If we take the word apart we get “re,” meaning *to look again*, and then the root, “cognize” which means *to be clear*. At that time, people who were lame, or otherwise deemed “lesser,” were thought of as not having the ability to be whole. So, the *recognition* of the lame beggar was a shift in sight,

that he was indeed whole and more than enough. I would even argue that the healing wasn't of the man, it was of the congregation or the community that had previously been blind to the man's wholeness.

What makes a good Easter sermon? What should laity walk away with? How do we celebrate those who are living the gospel, and how do we make visible the stories that help the scales fall off our eyes?

Growing up, Easter Sunday was my least favorite service to attend. I reflect back to when I was about ten and the church bus would pick up me, my brother Andy, and my sister Barbara for church. My friend Archie's dad was a preacher. I don't remember the name of the church, but I recall it was a storefront on West Washington Street. One Easter I was convinced to take the altar call and I got saved! I was so excited because after church they dropped us off at our grandparents' house and I would get to tell them everything was going to be ok. When we got there my grandmother greeted us at the door and waved to Archie's parents as we excitedly hugged her. As she closed the door and showed us into the kitchen for an Easter snack I yelled, "Grandma I got baptized today!" She replied, "You just went down a dry devil and come up a wet devil."

This response set a tone for me, not because my grandmother left me slightly discouraged, but because she was telling me that it wasn't the service that made you better, it was who you were outside of Sunday. My grandparents didn't think much of pastors because they didn't help people in her community. They lived the John 10:10 scripture. We kids would get dressed up in our best hand-me-downs as my mom contemplated whether she would be going or not, fearful the pastor might ask why she had she not been to church. Looking back, I didn't want to go to Easter service because of the guilt I felt after the sermons. I knew People like us would never match up to the call of Christ dying on the cross for our sins.

Even though my parents were not church going people, they were Christians. They cared about their community and their children. They took homeless people into their house and fed those who were hungry. They worked hard, they loved us and they taught us to love thy neighbor, stand up for those who can't advocate for themselves, and always welcome the stranger. At the time I didn't really understand scripture, and I realized that the preachers I grew up hearing preached sermons of shame and hopelessness—unless you took the altar call. As if, then, it all would go away, and life will be abundant forever. That is until next Easter!

By the time I was 16 I was probably at one of the lowest points in my life. My parents were now divorced and both struggling with addictions. Of course, my parents completely gave up going to church and talking about the altar calls didn't work. I felt Sunday mornings were no longer in my future, especially not attending another Easter service. Like some, I couldn't wash my sins away with a nice size offering.

What does it mean when the scriptures say, "Pick up your cross?"

My mother is our story keeper in the Braylock family. She is what my grand-

father was before he passed. He shared all the stories, photos, and records with my mom. He kept them in his Bible. In those collections there was a tin plate photograph from the mid 1800s of my great-great-great-grandfather, Isham Dupree, and his daughter, my great-great-grandmother, Big Momma Julia Taylor.

My mom has had a fascination with finding out their back stories. As she discovers information she saves it and shares it with the family. About three years ago I received an email with updated information about Isham. It was the bill of sale multiple for young men—no photo—just numbers and one name. All were ten years of age with the name Dupree, and one of them was him. It was really hard to look at. I wondered, why is God showing me this?

Showing me that, once upon a time, we were invisible and expendable? Showing me that the contributions people who look like me have made to this world, in this country, aren't recognized?

This was not the feeling I was looking for leading up to Easter Day. Yet God lives with us. The attention of the church must be on the fringes of religious life, pre- and post-resurrection Sunday.

My mother's stories were my grandparents' stories, and the libation of my ancestors. They reminded me that, even though un-Christlike things happened, abundance was still present.

Those same stories were passed to my mother from her granddad, who would gather neighbors around a tree he planted in the housing projects in South Bend, Indiana, in the 1950s and 60s. They did this as a reminder that God is always present even when things aren't going so well. He would quote John 10:10, where Jesus says, "I come so that you may live life abundantly." This includes times when life is not as we expected.

My family have been Hoosiers since the 1930s. We migrated to South Bend from New Madrid, Missouri, and Rutherford, Tennessee. It used to be illegal for Blacks to have permanent residence in this state. They were segregated to almost uninhabitable parts of the city. The only place African Americans could live in South Bend was a housing projects in a swamp. Memorial Hospital (where I was born) would dump its biohazard waste there. The city would dump its trash there. No one in the city treated these Black families as if they were sacred. They were treated like the lame beggar in Acts, being taken to the beautiful gate to ask for the drippings from those who are visible. But listening to my aunts, uncles, parents, and their friends ... growing up there was beautiful! They always laughed, they shared, and Lord knows they partied. They were a community that held things together because they believed that no contribution should go unnoticed.

In 2003, my family and I moved from the west side of Chicago to Indianapolis. My wife, Janeen's, job transferred us there. Rev. Mike Mather (who I had met in South Bend three years prior) and I had become friends and often kept in touch with one another. We would have intense conversations about what it meant to live

in abundance in low wealth communities, where dis-investment and over-policing had shaped our own “beautiful gate.” The Rev had moved to Indianapolis six months prior; he was now the senior pastor of a place where he previously served as an associate pastor under Reverend Phil Amerson. Mike was known as the “pastor of the streets,” and also as the “hoodlum priest”! Now as senior pastor, he knew that things needed to change. Though years had passed, little had changed since he left in 1991, except the membership had declined. In the ’50s we had been the largest congregation in the state of Indiana, boasting 5000 members. My family ended up living four blocks from the church, at Fairfield and Park. Our new neighborhood was similar to where we had lived in West Chicago.

Over the last forty years or so, congregational life has changed. Most people commute to worship services. Most members are disconnected from the actual communities surrounding the church, even while trying to solve the needs of the neighborhood. As a congregation we started examining our practices. We made some shifts in our community. We moved away from a “needs based” approach to starting to recognize the gifts we were missing. Before we acted as though problems and needs were the only things that were present. We probably assumed this because most people in the neighborhood were black and brown, and because it was a historically disenfranchised community. Now I find myself having to admit—we weren’t the cause of this disenfranchisement, but we were also not the solution.

As I was currently a stay-at-home dad to our one-year-old daughter, DeJanae, and eight-year-old McKeith, I had a chance to spend significant time in the neighborhood. I had developed a practice of discovering what brought people joy and what moved them to get off the couch. Rev. Mike would ask me what I learned from the four-block radius around the church. Well, one of the things I discovered was that the people who live there weren’t United Methodist! Many of us try to label people here; we make assumptions because people are poor. And, because of those assumptions, we had missed where God was actually working in the world, in our parish, and in the homes of the mothers and fathers, children and grandparents.

Every Sunday in the beginning of service (especially on Easter!), we will chant in unison our mission statement. It ends: *The mission of the people at Broadway United Methodist Church is to seek, welcome, and value all people.*

We began to realize that we needed to find new ways to welcome and to be welcomed as a good neighbor. We were currently falling short of the part of our mission that is to “value” all people; we realized that there was much we didn’t know about our neighbors—that there was a plethora of gifts and talents and people who really cared the community. We saw that God’s abundance was right in front of us.

What does this mean for an Easter sermon, to speak to a community or a parish about the crucifixion of Christ? What does this mean for pastors preparing an Easter sermon that connects with laity and the rest of the community? In Mary Oliver’s advice on living the gospel, I think she understands what Jesus was trying to say before

and after the resurrection. Rev. Mike helped me understand that a good sermon, especially on Easter Sunday, reminds us that God is *right in front of us*! That we have to practice hard to see, pay attention, and to remember our stories of baptism. We need our pastors to be good neighbors by witnessing to the abundance in our communities.

As a Wesleyan, I think it is important for pastors preaching Easter sermons to make visible the invisible in our parishes. Parish stories of hope, affirmation and the abundance, and the agency of our souls must be sought out. John Wesley says, “the world is our parish.” It is important to celebrate the community around the church so that we can build the capacity of the agency around us. Reverend Mike helped us cultivate such a space in our liturgy. We called it the LCC—“Lesson from the Contemporary Church”—because God didn’t stop when the book (the Bible) went to press. The LCC has become a time of testimony, inviting residents and church members to share where they see God working in the world. It usually is right before the sermon. After the service, people who care about what was shared have a chance to get to know one another. That experience feels like a true altar call.