

“Together Again!”
Acts 2:43-47 and Theme Reading by Vivek H. Murthy

Introduction: Together Again

Together again. This summer has been a rebirth in so many ways. The rummage sale week is always an experience but this year seemed special. We had no shortage of volunteers like we sometimes have in the past. Many of my normal support tasks were voluntarily taken on by others which gave me space to just be with people. // The connections and energy and conversations between young and old and everywhere in between were simply inspiring. Like coyotes and badgers, we were on a mission together. Together again.

Coyotes and badgers are normally very different from one another and often do not mingle. Human beings have their differences too which often limits their interaction. Our unique perspectives on the world often leave us entrenched in our own bunkers. For example, why did the chicken cross the road? Well there are predictable responses and perspectives, depending on whom you ask! Joe Biden would say, “well, like Rocky Balboa, I am a fighter. I have fought my whole life for the chickens in Pennsylvania and now the U.S. I will not give up fighting for the chickens crossing the road. Donald Trump would say, “there was no collusion”. He would add, “I don’t believe we need to get the chickens across the road. I say give the road to the chickens and let them decide”. Barack *Obama would say, there is Hope for the chickens. As long as we stay together, we can all get to the other side!*

And of course youth have their own set of responses. Why did the chicken cross the road? The Jr. High youth might say, well it sort of depends if there was pizza or donuts involved. The Sr. High youth would say, “WASSUP CHICKEN?” (Or “That’s what she says!”) And college students would say, “I don’t know, but is that going to be on the exam?” We all have our different perspectives on the motive of the chicken and are often limited by our shallow views on the world around us.

Changed by Stepping Out

Today, I want to talk about the moments when we experienced a significant change in our perspective and lives. Portland Author Brian Doyle tells this story about change.

“Committed a sin yesterday, in the hallway, at noon. I roared at my son, I grabbed him by the shirt collar, I frightened him so badly that he cowered and wept, and when he turned to run I grabbed him by the arm so roughly that he flinched, and it was that flicker of fear and pain across his face, the bright eager holy riveting face I have loved for ten years, that stopped me then and haunts me this morning; for I am the father of his fear, I sent it snarling into his heart, and I can never get it out now, which torments me. ...”

Doyle says: “I do not know how sins can be forgiven. I grasp the concept, I admire the genius of the idea, I suspect it to be the seed of all real peace—but I do not understand how foul can be made fair. No God can forgive what we do to each other, only the injured can summon that extraordinary grace.

Doyle goes on to tell the story, the instant I let go of my son’s arm, he sprinted away and ... slammed the door, and ran down the street and I stood there simmering in shame. Then I walked down the hill into the laurel thicket as dense and silent as the dawn of the world and found him there huddled and sobbing.

We knelt in the moist green dark for a long time, not saying anything, the branches burly and patient. Finally, I asked quietly for his forgiveness...and he asked for mine...and we walked out of the woods... hand in hand,,changed men.”

Changed. Changed human beings. Change that was not planned, but because someone took the first step, it happened. Sometimes that is all it takes. Reaching out to another. Being vulnerable. Together again.

Change by Events or Experiences that “Shock”

Our American culture suggests that change can be willed, can be thought through...can be planned for and organized around. And some change can be like that—I don’t deny it. But I am struck by how often real change comes after an event or shock to our way of life, a jolt that jars us out of our habits.

This past year and a half of COVID was such an event. It takes energy—some force—so often...to shift us off our dimes—to break our habits of heart and mind—to open us to new possibilities and new hope. How do you see the world differently today than you did two years ago?

I believe George Floyd’s murder was that kind of event that shocked many white Americans—a shock that called millions out onto the streets—and thousands to examine their privilege.

In my own life, it took a stroke to get me to slow down and change my values...to convince me finally to listen once again to the call to ministry... I had been working so hard to get my PhD and working full time, coupled with an additional internship, long ago now, but I remember vividly the shock to my system when I finally had to accept that I couldn’t do it on my own. I remember how my stroke opened me up—to hear the call back to ministry. It took that shock to make me realize that I needed to be Together again. That shock, that event became a blessing as I hobbled into this community at Southminster and prepared to adopt children, Tony and Ciera. My life was forever changed.

I am reminded of the *Loggerhead Turtle* story as told by Barbara Brown Taylor in her book, *Leaving the Church to Find God*. It's the story of a turtle stranded on the beach but later rescued by a park ranger and dragged back to the ocean. Taylor writes, "sometimes God's blessing does not come until daybreak, after a full night of emptying ourselves and wandering in the wrong direction".

I've told my story from the pulpit before. I say it again, because we, collectively, have just lived through a huge shock, a full night of emptying ourselves, a devastating shock to our systems—our personal systems and our collective systems. The pandemic, these past 15 months, called so many things into question. How and where we work. What school looks like. How we shop. How we socialize. How we do church. Not to mention all of the losses we need to grieve. We have been jolted out of so many habits. And now that we are together again, we have a chance to make changes in the way we see each other—the way we approach life and the world around us. We have the opportunity to let others in like never before. To change our perspective. To allow ourselves to become vulnerable.

Mission Trips: A Catalyst for Change

I had the opportunity to sit down with Denise King this week, a member of the youth group when I first arrived here in 2006. Denise went on our first mission trip to Spokane in 2007. In fact, it was Denise and six other students, and Audrey Sheidler as a leader, that asked if we could return to Spokane every other year instead of it being a one and done event. They believed that we must maintain our connection because of the vitally important ministry in the West Central neighborhood. They were internally and forever changed.

I believe that mission trips are catalysts for change. Not because of what we do or accomplish but because of what happens inside of us and the relationships that are built and nourished. It is an opportunity to see how poor people live and function and realize that those of us in the middle class may not be in poverty in terms of material possessions, but perhaps we live in poverty when it comes to our perspective on life and others.

I remember, one boy in particular, Sean, when I was youth director in Sandpoint Idaho. Here was a kid that was a complete troublemaker—even more than Tony. Other parents were lobbying for this kid not to go on the mission to Mexico. Well, I made sure he went. He came back and asked if he could give the sermon at our Youth Sunday. I will never forget what he said. Sean spoke, "we Americans look at the Mexicans and we think those poor Mexicans, they don't have anything. I was wondering, if they don't look back at us and say ``those poor Americans, they don't have anything". // Sean became a catalyst for change in the youth group to do more and more mission and service work. He was forever changed.

Mission work is about taking the first step toward others. To be sure, the issues surrounding poverty and food and housing insecurity are massive as we will discover this week. We don't have all the answers, we shouldn't have our own agenda, we simply make ourselves available and even more importantly—vulnerable—so that change can take place. In us. And maybe, just maybe, in others along the way. Barbara Brown Taylor offers these words, “Our job is to struggle with the terrors, neither surrendering nor stealing away, until they have yielded their blessing”.

Together Again

It may seem that the people we serve on a mission trip are the ones in desperate need. That may be true. But it is also true that we are the ones in desperate need. Now that we are together again, a community of support and purpose, don't let the world pass you by without examining your life and practices and calling.

- Together again—It is time for us to recognize, whether coyote or badger, we belong on one mission together.
- Together again—Now is the time to step forward with the person or persons you may have hurt—now is the time to step up and make change happen.
- Together again—The shock of this pandemic has changed our perspective forever. Now is the time to do something about it and right the wrongs of injustice that we see.
- And for those going to Spokane this week—together again—pay attention, pay attention to yourselves, each other and especially those you meet. Make a new friend. Make two new friends. Practice forgiveness. Take the first step. Be open to the shock of this new experience and let it change you and mold you into someone deeper and more compassionate. And as you have heard me say for over 30 years of leading mission trips: Be the change you wish to see!

So why did the chicken really cross the road? Duh! To be together again with coyotes and badgers because that is how life should be! And to do what needed to be done! Let us do likewise.

A-men.