

Ezekiel 36

I Don't Know

June 21, 2020

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We've been talking the last few weeks about wisdom drawn from early Christians, specifically the monks we call desert mothers and fathers. These wise spiritual mentors were among the diverse group of people who, in the 3rd-5th centuries, left society behind and moved to the deserts of the Middle East, places like Egypt and Syria. They were in search of a deeper connection with God and along the way, they found themselves and they gathered wisdom about being in community with God and with other people. As I have studied some of these wisdom sayings, I have been struck by how relevant they are today.

One day some old men came to see Abba Anthony. In the midst of them was Abba Joseph. Wanting to test them, the old man suggested a text from the Scriptures, and, beginning with the youngest, he asked them what it meant. Each gave his opinion as he was able, but to each one, the old man said, "You have not understood it."

Last of all he said to Abba Joseph, "How would you explain this saying?" and he replied, "I do not know." Then Abba Anthony said, "Indeed, Abba Joseph has found the way, for he has said: 'I do not know.'"

~Anthony the Great (Valters-Paintner)

At the heart of desert spirituality is the acknowledgment that there is so much we, as human beings, do not know. We don't fully know ourselves. We don't fully know other people and we certainly do not and cannot fully know God. This admission, that we don't know it all, is hard for so many of us. For some reason, we have this idea that not knowing all the things counts as failure. But the truth is, not knowing something doesn't mean we have failed, it means we have more to learn. Failure comes if we refuse to learn.

The last few weeks, I have listened to friends who are Black and one of the things I've heard from many of them is that white people don't want to listen to them. Think about it.

White people didn't want to listen when Black people had sit-ins at lunch counters or when they refused to stand on the bus. We didn't like it when we saw

Black football players kneeling during the national anthem and it makes us uncomfortable when they carry signs that say Black Lives Matter. We tell them we would listen if they would only talk to us nicely, if they wouldn't disrupt traffic or inconvenience us. But that's not true.

For a very long time, white people in this nation have refused to learn from the stories of Black people. Their stories of excessive punishment in classrooms, gerrymandering, discrimination in the workplace, disproportionate poverty, and fear of law enforcement have been ignored by the white majority at best and disbelieved at worst. Our collective lack of humility when it comes to listening to the stories of people who have different experiences from our own is one of the reasons I believe there is such division in our nation.

There's another reason our nation is divided. We haven't agreed on our shared history. As Tulsa has been in the media spotlight this week, stories of the 1921 Greenwood massacre in Tulsa have been broadcast. The number of people I have seen, just in my own social media circles, who have never learned about it, is stunning. We do not do a good job of teaching African American and Black history in our schools. And the problem with that is we cannot know the history of our country and ignore these parts of it. Historical truths play an important role in understanding what is happening today. We can't move forward without acknowledging the truth of the past.

A while ago, a friend gave me the book *Be the Bridge*, by Latasha Morrison. I shared a prayer from the book earlier. Morrison's bio says she is, "...a bridge builder, reconciler, and compelling voice in the fight for racial justice." In the book, she writes about how the African American History class she took her freshman year in college impacted her. As a Black woman, she did not expect there was so much of her own history she did not know. She wondered why she didn't learn this "unfiltered truth" sooner.

After college, she worked for a predominately white Fortune 500 company where it became clear to her that the people around her had little understanding of the history of Black America and how that history has affected and continues to affect this nation. In 2012, she took a job at an almost entirely white church, with a white staff, in Austin Texas. While there, she was again, and even more intently, confronted with the disconnect between Black people and white people,

especially with regard to the ways in which “the white church in America had perpetuated slavery, segregation, and racism” (Morrison, 3). As she worked with and got to know the white people around her, she realized that, like herself the day she walked into that freshman African American History class, her co-workers, church members, and people in her social circle were oblivious to the full scope of American history and its multicultural realities. She writes, “With that realization, I made a conscious decision: I’d do my best to build a bridge between the majority and the non-white church cultures” (Morrison, 5). The first thing she did was invite her white friends to watch the movie based on Alice Walker’s novel, *The Color Purple*. Together, they began a racial-reconciliation discussion group from which the book was born and from which many other bridge building groups have been inspired.

In addition, is a thriving social media community called “Be the Bridge” to Racial Healing. The group is a “community of people who share a common goal of creating healthy dialogue about racism and racialization in the U.S., with an emphasis on promoting understanding about racial disparities and injustices. The group strives to “create a safe and positive space for both learners and well-seasoned reconcilers.” Before being accepted into the group, potential members are required to answer very specific questions. Once in the group, members must adhere to the group rules which include three months of silence within the group which is to be used to actively listen and learn.

Three months of listening to understand, not to respond. Three months of acknowledging that we have a lot to learn and listening to the experiences and wisdom of Black people and people who have been about the work of racial reconciliation for a very long time. What can we learn in three months? I am in the midst of that time myself. I have been wondering what things I believe right now that are not true. I wonder, at the end of this time, in what ways my heart will be changed. Christians talk a lot about changing hearts. We sing about it and we pray about it.

In the midst of the book of Ezekiel, which, by the way, is not a very pleasant text, is a passage about changing hearts. The book was written as a response to the fall of Jerusalem to the neo-Babylonian empire in 587 BCE. The poems that run through most of the book find ways to blame the Judeans for their own demise. In a number of places, including today’s reading, Ezekiel makes it clear that anything

God does for the people at that point is for God, not for them. This is Ezekiel 36:22-28.

²² Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. ²³ I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. ²⁴ I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. ²⁸ Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

In order to understand the metaphor of the heart transplant at the end of this text, let's take a short detour into ancient Egyptian burial practices. It will be fun, I promise.

You are aware that people died, their bodies were mummified. As part of this process, Egyptians replaced the dead person's heart with a stone.

In Egyptian burial scenes, the dead person's heart was weighed against a feather. Only if it was lighter than a feather would the deceased be able to enter the world of the dead. Otherwise, the heart was devoured and the person ceased to exist, both in the world of the living and in the world of the dead. They believed sins weighed down the heart: the heavier the heart, the more sinful a person was.

So now, back to Ezekiel's reference to a heart of stone. He presents the Judeans as inherently sinful, with a collective heart as heavy as stone. God performs this heart transplant and the people were filled with...the English says spirit, but in Hebrew it is ruach, which is the breath of God. The people were given a collective new heart and were filled with the very breath of God. We should understand that Ezekiel did not say God restored the people because God loved them so much, which is the kind of thing I would write. Not Ezekiel. Remember, I said the book isn't pleasant. Ezekiel wanted the people to know that God would restore

them because of God and who God is. Verse 22 again, "...it is not for your sake... but for the sake of my holy name." Plot twist. It's not about us, it's about God.

It's about who God is, not who we are. While we would love to imagine ourselves the center of God's world, we aren't. Instead, I believe God's vision of wholeness for all of creation is God's center. If there is something keeping God up at night, it's that. Wholeness means there is real justice for everyone. Everyone has the opportunity to become who they were created to be because they have access to healthcare, education, food, shelter, they feel a sense of belonging and they know love. The environment is cared for, animals and habitats are protected, water and air are clean. War isn't a thing, so there is no danger we will blow up the whole planet or kill off an entire group of people. This is wholeness. If you agree with me that wholeness is the center of God's world, then maybe we can agree that wholeness ought to be the center of our world too.

If we are to engage in the work of bringing wholeness to a fragmented world, we have to first be aware of what is broken. We have to de-center our own stories and experiences and center the stories and experiences of people who have been denied justice and opportunity. We have to center the good of the whole and de-center our individual preferences. We have to affirm the value of all of creation, instead of asserting our dominance over everything and everyone. In short, we have to humble ourselves and listen. We don't know everything. We only know what our experiences have taught us. Can we begin to empathize with our Black siblings? Are we willing to really listen to their pain? In *Be the Bridge*, Morrison writes, "The work of racial reconciliation requires us to acknowledge the harm and to lament it." If we do this work, "...we'll find ourselves drawn out of complacency and complicit behavior and into the hard work and sorrow that lead us to repentance...[and then] we can move into the deep healing of racial reconciliation" (Morrison, 49-50).

But first, we have to acknowledge that there is so much that we don't know.

Say it with me, "I don't know."

And then we have to commit to listening and learning.

When we listen to each other, when we know each other's names and the names of one another's children, when we learn what another person's deepest fear and greatest hope are, when we walk together, cry together and celebrate together, we, ourselves, change. Our hearts change. And little by little, God's vision of

wholeness comes more clearly into focus. And there we are, at the center of who God is, at the center of who we were created to be, bringing wholeness to a fragmented world. Amen.

The books mentioned in the sermon:

(Valters-Paintner, Christine, *Desert Fathers and Mothers: Early Christian Wisdom Sayings*, digital edition, location 1151)

Morrison, Latasha, *Be the Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart for Racial Reconciliation*, Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2019).