Being Part of the Story

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Greetings Friends!

I am grateful for the opportunity to be with you today. Some of you know that my home church is Bread of Life, another community that has followed in the Church of the Saviour tradition. We are family, even if our reunions may not be that frequent!

Our scripture for today comes from the lectionary reading about a month ago, and was very timely for me, as you’ll see as we go further this morning.

Psalm 80:7-11

7 Restore us, God Almighty;
    make your face shine on us,
    that we may be saved.

8 You transplanted a vine from Egypt;
    you drove out the nations and planted it.
9 You cleared the ground for it,
    and it took root and filled the land.
10 The mountains were covered with its shade,
    the mighty cedars with its branches.
11 Its branches reached as far as the Sea,
    its shoots as far as the River.

John 15: 1-8: The Vine and the Branches

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. **2**He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2015&version=NIV#fen-NIV-26702a)] so that it will be even more fruitful. **3**You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. **4**Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

**5**“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. **6**If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. **7**If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. **8**This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

In our Psalm we are reminded that God has the wherewithal to pull up roots and replant a vine anywhere, at any time. That’s a statement about what it means to be the Divine planter.

Our gospel text is about vines and branches. In this case, the vine is our Divine source, and we as people and communities of people are its branches. This one is about the importance of staying connected to the One true vine, of remaining connected to source.

As we celebrate All Saints Day today, I’d like to connect these images of the vine with another metaphor: that is about the power of Story. The power that comes from staying connected to story.

What story is that you might ask?

Well, first off, some of you know that Jubilee Housing is celebrating its 50th birthday this month and will be holding a special Jubilee gala at the Washington Cathedral. In planning for this special occasion, I have been thinking a lot about the Jubilee Housing story as a branch of the Church of the Saviour story, and more broadly as a part of a vine that shares origins with so many others — from Potter’s House, to Christ House, Joseph’s House, Jubilee Jobs, Sitar, Faith and Money Network, Life Asset and beyond. So many missions born of one vine.

But before that though, I mean “The Story.” The one that is handed down in Holy Scripture. That includes heroes like Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Paul. And heroines like Sarah, Rachel, and Mary. A Story that recounts God’s love for His people. The persistent calling to belong. To liberation, to mercy, to love. To welcoming the stranger and the ones who are down-and-out. To standing up to power, to replacing exclusion with belonging. To forgiveness, repentance, and second chances.

The Holy Story is rich and full, and it is direct and challenging.

And as our Psalm says, it can be planted anywhere…

 You transplanted a vine from Egypt;
    you drove out the nations and planted it.

This is a reference to God calling a new nation through Abraham, to a new Promised Land through Moses.

God can plant vines wherever God wants to, and people of any background can become part of that plant.

As I have been reflecting on Jubilee’s Jubilee anniversary, I am coming to some important insights that I hope might be of use to us as a community.

While steeped in real history, in a flow of real actors and important actions, we are not doing a history lesson

While there are so many saints to lift up, from Gordon and Bill Branner, to Carolyn, Terry and Barbara, to Rosa Hatfield, Charletta Cowling and Gilma Merino, it’s not about revering our ancestors as much as it is about *following them*. About being inspired by them to lay down our lives in similar fashion.

As we reflect on a long line of saints that we have known, it’s important to note that God is not bound to the historical lineage of His/Her people. While Israel held a special place in God’s heart, what God wants most is folks who will follow God’s dream for the world. Abraham birthing a new nation. Moses leading a people to a new promise land. And Jesus proclaiming:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, Because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor: He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, And recovering of sight to the blind, To set at liberty them that are bruised, To proclaim the year of the Lord.

Jesus tells the pharisees that God can raise up children of Abraham from a bunch of rocks. There is no automatic birthright.

It matters not where we are born, what country we hail from, what we look like, or how much money or status we have. Or whether even, we were formed in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour! God does not care about those things. God wants a people who will be humble, who will give themselves in sacrificial love and who will be co-creators with God.

Our memories are not meant to build memorials to our leaders and saints, but a culture of following them. A corporate practice of following.

I remember when news first broke that a museum was being built in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Gordon made the comment that while the museum would be a valuable place, he thought Dr King would rather have people give their lives and their money for the same reasons that he did. For the practice of justice and mercy. For equality and prosperity. Not for a museum!

It is too easy to lift up our Saints and point out how exceptional they are. If they are so extraordinary, then we don’t have to be expected to follow in their footsteps and do things as radically as they did!

So we are tempted to worship rather than follow. To honor and exalt, rather than surrender our own lives in like manner.

Are you with me?

So let’s take a minute to think about the Jubilee Housing story in ways that I believe resonate with the Holy Story, and in ways that are still available to us today. You may have heard the story about how three young women found two apartment buildings in Adams Morgan. They were the Ritz and Mozart buildings, right behind us. And it was Carolyn Banker (now Cresswell), Terry Flood, and Barbara Moore. And Betsy Edmonds was in that group too — part of the Thursday mission group.

And with Gordon’s support, they approached the most accomplished person they knew — Jim Rouse — father of the modern mall, developer of Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, the town of Columbia, and much later, the Festival Center. Jim Rouse was a bit like Warren Buffet, or Bill Gates — thought of as one of the best businesspersons of his era.

And most of you know the story. His first response was “turn and run.” Who are you to take on these two failing properties. Where are your credentials, where is your track record? [It so happens that they did have one … of buying a church headquarters on Dupont Circle, of buying a retreat farm in Germantown … but that is a story for a different day!]. They had already put down a non-refundable earnest money deposit. They would lose everything, including this dream they just knew they were called to.

Of course, Jim Rouse later called back to say that he was moved by their faithfulness, and he wanted to help. He went on to finance the purchase of the two properties.

Now family, I tell you, I am one for a good story. That would be enough right there. But there’s more.

One of the reasons they went forward — against all odds and without proper resumés — was because they were answering to a higher authority than even Jim Rouse! They were responding out of their connection to the Vine. Their bush had burned, and they were “all in” for the dream.

And from that humble beginning, they had infused the Jubilee mission with Holy Spirit DNA!

Amen?

And that thing kept happening. More than twenty times over and most recently with Recovery Café DC in historic Anacostia!!!

These aren’t just good non-profit missions, at their core, and when connected to the vine, they are expressions of God’s very being and intention … they are part of The Holy Story … they are branches of the one true vine … they are people coming together to lay down their lives to follow the One Who Is.

They make it not because they are particularly good at business, but rather because they are all-in surrendered to the Caller. Not because of credentials and best practices, but because they don’t know enough by the world’s standards to be scared away.

You can only accomplish the impossible when you don’t know enough to know it’s not possible! And, when you are willing to bear the pain and challenge of the “not yet” while you struggle to bring it into being.

Jim Rouse initially said NO! You don’t have the skills, you don’t have the experience, you don’t have the expertise.

And there is a critical corollary to this notion of not having a resumé. God seems willing to infuse the uninitiated, the unremarkable with a kind of life power that is not available to ones who think they have it all worked out.

If God only called the gifted, if things only happened when people of particular skills would act — so much of what is important in life would not have happened. And when God calls the ordinary, God evokes the gifts needed to make it work.

The early Jubilee community responded with their lives … we don’t need the resumé. We have the Story. We have been called by the Story Maker. All we know is that it needs to happen, and we are willing to give our lives that it might be so. We are walking in the age-old tradition of those who have been called and led into the Promise Land … who have come to know the Year of the Lord.

Right church?

So, friends, when I came to Jubilee Housing the second time, I had no idea how to finance and renovate those properties. I would never have been selected by a best practice shop to run a redevelopment campaign. I had no expertise … I had no chops!

And, if I knew then how hard it would be, I never would have been able to say YES. I didn’t know enough to be scared away.

And yet, last week we acquired an 18th property, that when complete, will cap off a recent doubling of our justice housing community — deeply affordable housing, with onsite and nearby programs and amenities, in resource rich neighborhoods.

Hallelujah!

Some of you know the Recovery Café DC mission in Anacostia, led by Jacqueline and Donald Connerly. We celebrated the fifth Bridging-the-Gap fundraiser there on Thursday. If we had known how hard it would be to get that property built on Good Hope Road, we might have been scared away from there too! How many times it would literally stretch us to the end of our rope?

The Story is written through people who are willing to be taken beyond their gifts. God gifts the called … not calls the gifted. Right church?

I feel like I am just getting going, but know I need to bring this to a close.

We remember The Story not because it is a good history lesson. And we remember our saints not because we want to revere them [although we do!]

This remembering is to inspire us, challenge us, and open us to newness. It is to keep us connected to the vine. It is to invite us to *travel with* our ancestors into new beginnings and new chapters. The God who made us is always making new things and wants and needs us to lay down our lives so that we may called into a life of co-creation.

To what next thing is God inviting the people of 8th Day Church? Right!

Ok, so allow me to close with one of my most favorite texts, 2 Corinthians 4: 7-18. It’s my favorite because it reminds me that this thing is not about us.

Treasure in Jars of Clay

**7**But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. **8**We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; **9**persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; **10**always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies … **13**Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, “I believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe, and so we also speak, **14**knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. **15**For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. **16**So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. **17**For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, **18**as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Friends, when we take time to remember our story, we have a chance to be placed in The Story … and when we do that, we are working on the unseen things … that will last forever. Amen!