

Things Unseen

Lent is a traditionally a time of renunciation. We give up some small pleasure--TV, chocolate, a glass of wine with dinner—in the hope of making room for larger changes. Some renunciations are more challenging than others. I remember the nine-year-old daughter of a friend of mine once telling her mom, “I’m giving up sarcasm for Lent. And it’s really hard.”

This Lent we have been called upon to make the truly unexpected renunciation of giving up gathering for Sunday Worship in the sanctuary of our church. Like my friend’s daughter, I’m finding it hard. I miss the hustle and bustle of Sunday morning. I miss greeting the Faith and Life community at the coffee pot before class begins. I miss seeing the Sunday School teachers setting up their classrooms and watching the children rush into the center aisle to meet them during the greetings. I miss looking out into the sanctuary and seeing students, neighbors, staff, faculty, visitors all sitting together, praying together, singing together, listening together. I miss how our community makes visible the invisible truth that during the hour of worship, we create something together. No sermon is ever finished until a congregation hears it, questions it, and thinks with it about the things that matter most to them. I hope that is happening now. But I can’t see the traces of your response cross your faces as I speak or talk to you after the service by the front door. So there’s something of our shared work that remains invisible this morning.

The portion of the letter to the Hebrews that Grace read for us is about invisible things. “Faith,” the letter says, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Our church is empty this morning because of something unseen: the coronavirus. Of course, you’ve probably seen images of what it looks like under a microscope. The Divinity School has one on its homepage if you’re curious. But those oddly beautiful spheres studded

with their colorful adornments aren't visible to the naked human eye. We can't see them drifting through the air, alighting on surfaces, traveling from one person to another through a handshake or a sneeze. If we could, it would be a lot easier to stop the virus from spreading.

Invisible things, like viruses, are unnerving precisely because we can't see them. And so there is a temptation to render them visible in often dangerous ways. In her beautiful Morning Prayers talk this past week, Patricia Bellinger, the chief of staff to the president of Harvard, told us about attending the joyful recent wedding of a young couple, only to learn that they were later verbally assaulted in South Station by someone who believed that, because their ethnicity was visible, the coronavirus was too.

This is its own kind of contagion, at least as dangerous as COVID-19. It's very likely that we will eventually have a vaccine for the coronavirus. But there's no vaccine for xenophobia, for racism, for the sudden eruption of violence. These are contagions we have to battle as hard as we are battling the virus itself. Because when we feel helpless in the face of the invisible, the temptation to turn against each other, to blame someone visible can be very great. And it can spread faster than the virus itself.

Resisting such temptations is part of the story of Lent. When Jesus meets Satan in the desert, he is tempted to give up his convictions in exchange for power and control. "All the kingdoms of the world can be yours," the tempter promises, "if you bow down and worship me." Satan waits until Jesus has been in the desert a while, to tempt him when he is at his most fragile. Our society feels fragile. These are the kinds of moments in which we can be tempted to abandon our convictions. Contagions born of fear, and the desire to blame someone, will spread if we do not stand up against them, just as the coronavirus will spread if we don't acknowledge

that it is moving invisibly among us, threatening those made vulnerable by illness, by age, by economic and social injustice.

There are other contagions, though, that we should try to help spread. In my class on contemplative prayer this semester, we've been reading a book by Howard Thurman, the former dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University and one of the great theologians of the civil rights movement, whose books Martin Luther King, Jr. carried with him as he led acts of non-violent resistance across the south. Thurman often speaks in his work of contagion as a shaping force in his life. He was raised by his grandmother who had been enslaved in the state of Florida before the civil war. "Whenever she saw that the water was getting low in my well, or my sister's well," he said, their grandmother would tell them a story from her own life, about a preacher, also enslaved, who would come over once a year from a neighboring plantation to preach to the community. His sermons always ended the same way—with an exhortation to remember that, while they were enslaved within a dehumanizing system, "slave" was not their identity. Their identity was: human being. Their identity was child of God. As she spoke, Thurman said, his grandmother's spine would straighten, and her profound sense of her dignity as one made in God's image would reach him, he said, like a contagion. Her dignity was irresistible, and formed in him the conviction that "the creator of existence itself" had created him. "With that kind of backing," as he put it, there was nothing he couldn't do. Such conviction spreads by contagion, he believed, from one person to another. Religious experience, Thurman said, is "dynamic, fluid, effervescent, yeasty." The mind wants to capture it, to bottle it up in dogmas, make it visible in concepts. But that's not how the vitality of religious experience spreads, he taught. It spreads from person to person, irresistibly.

Howard Thurman's life's work was to participate in *that* contagion—to spread the recognition of human dignity that has its source in God, both as one who had caught it from his grandmother and who had passed it along to others—to the students in his classes, to the people in his congregations, to everyone he encountered. How did he do that? By allowing what he called his “sporadic turning toward God” in prayer to become “the very climate of the soul.” When Imam Khalil Abdur-Rashid taught and preached here a few months ago, he talked about how, on pilgrimage, Muslims do not wear any scent or perfume so that they can focus on cultivating a spiritual atmosphere—something invisible, yet palatable, even catchable: a gift one person can bring to another. I think that's what Howard Thurman meant, too. His soul's climate was rooted in the unseen—the God who is always more than our concepts can begin to express. But it was something that could spread, from person to person, hand to hand, through the way he recognized the image of God in everyone he encountered, the way he greeted the dignity in each person that is every human being's birthright.

In this time of contagion, we need to take care about what kind of climate we cultivate around us, what “things unseen” we spread. And even though we are not able to gather for worship in our usual way, we can draw on the things we have practiced here to contribute to the spread, not of scapegoating, but of the recognition of human dignity.

Each week, we practice greeting one another with a sign of peace. And although we cannot continue to do that here, we can pass peace wherever we are. Peace can be part of the climate, the atmosphere we carry around with us. It will be a while before we can offer a handshake or an embrace again, I fear. But having to renounce those ways of greeting one another with a sign of peace might help us be even more intentional about how we cross the distances between ourselves and others. Timothy Snyder, an historian of the authoritarian

regimes of the 20th century, has written that making eye contact and small talk in the course of daily life is a form of resistance to tyranny. What people who were vulnerable under repressive regimes remember later, he says, is how their neighbors treated them. If their neighbors averted their eyes when they met, or crossed the street to avoid them, those same people felt more fearful. And with good reason. People who are isolated and ignored are much easier for authoritarian regimes to harm than those who are held, seen and remembered in community. Making eye contact and exchanging greetings are practices by which we recognize each other's humanity and dignity and knit each other into a common life.

We have also practiced praying here, practiced holding ourselves and the needs of others and of the world around us before God. Howard Thurman taught that prayer opens our life to another's need and helps us see what that need has to do with us. He also says our prayers for one another might put us all in the path of the invisible but "vast creative energies of God." These two effects of prayer seem like two dimensions of the same experience, with God's vast creative energies winding through the lives of the one who prays and the one who is prayed for, filling the space between us with a growing understanding of what we owe one another and a growing desire to be of use to one another. Keep praying, dear friends, while we are apart.

We have also practiced being on pilgrimage. The questions we brought to our life together this year—what difference might it make if we understood our many journeys as pilgrimages? How would that shape the way we move our bodies through the world?—seem even more urgent as we find ourselves in the middle of an unexpected journey through a world suddenly changed.

This is not how we expected to make our Lenten pilgrimage. We thought we would be greeted by Alex and Maggie and other student deacons at the front door. We thought we would

be sitting close by one another, the music of the choir flowing over the tops of our heads. We thought we would be crowding into the aisle the way we do at the passing of the peace, trying to greet as many people as possible before the hymn ends. We thought we'd be gathering together around the table for the Lord's Supper in this holy season. Instead, we're spread out in homes and cars and workplaces, listening on the radio or online, on Sunday or some other day, gathering ourselves into community as best we can.

But we've been practicing for this. We've been practicing all year long to be able to worship, as Diana Eck said in her wonderful Morning Prayers talk last week, at all the altars of this world. For there is no place where gestures of peace are not needed, no encounter where the dignity of others does not need to be recognized and greeted. There is no day when we do not need to open ourselves to the lives of others and the vast, creative energies of God. There is no journey in which we cannot seek the presence of the sacred within us and around us or feel the claim of the journeys of others on our own.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. As we feel our way along this unexpected journey, may we help one another hold onto our hope—our hope in God, in one another, in the world God created and called good. Abraham and Sarah stepped out into the invisible future, and so do we, every day. May the vision of a world we have heard in our scriptures, practiced in our rituals and shared with each other—a world in which everyone's humanity is revered and cherished, in which we all take responsibility for the common good--be the contagion that spreads and keeps spreading.

Amen.