

September 20, 2020 (Focus: Philippians 1:21-30)

What is the good news we need to hear today?

It's hard not to think about that question without also thinking about how we are feeling impacted by the death of a certain diminutive in physical stature but not in diminutive in how she changed the world for the better Jewish woman, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Her father was a Jewish immigrant, fleeing persecution in the growing foment of discrimination and prejudice that was Europe in between the two great wars. They lived in a country that professed to welcoming "huddled masses yearning to be free," which no doubt inspired her, as did the Constitution she saw as a living document that was flexible enough for changing times. She knew loss, a sister who died as a child, a mother who died too young. And she herself faced discrimination, as a Jew and as a woman. All this drove Bader Ginsburg to work tirelessly for decades for the rights of others. Where others saw only difference and otherness, she saw diversity but equality, and she saw a system that was meant to embrace such equality. Her death was not unexpected, although I think a lot of us were desperately trying to will her to stay alive for at least a few more month.

Her death is a source of sadness and grief for many, but where we seek but perhaps lack the ability yet to see where the good news is in response to her death. It seems as if this crazy year and this tensely contested political season we are in, well, how would we describe it? More than one person has noted how it seems like decades ago that the impeachment was held, but it was only earlier this year. Someone described this year as like a campfire where someone squirted a little charcoal lighter onto the fire, then a little more, then a little more,...each time making the campfire bigger and that much more threatening. Impeachment, COVID pandemic with deaths and more deaths and not enough PPE, economic disaster, John Lewis dead, massive wildfires and more hurricanes than they had names for, and now "the Notorious RBG" dead. What is next, we all wonder, even as we try to get through one of the ugliest political campaigns in memory.

We were talking about all of this in the biweekly zoom gathering my siblings and I are now enjoying, when my oldest sister Kathy said that she would even go back to church if Joe Biden won the election, because that would mean that there really is a God. I of course could have argued that all that has happened is not evidence that there is no God, but I think I know what she really meant – she was having trouble forgiving God for all that has

been happening, and all that could happen if the election were to go a particular way.

Many feel, maybe more than once recently, like crying out as Jesus did the lament of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” We could continue on with that Psalm, “Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.” And like the psalmist, some days we can even muster hope amidst the struggle, recognizing that God is our creator; no matter how others may see us, we are created by the divine holy one, and we can say “for God did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted, he did not hid his face from me, but heard when I cried to him. From God comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who obey God. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek God shall praise the Lord.”

Last week we heard Peter ask the question, how many times am I to forgive, seven times? And Jesus answering, not seven, but seventy-seven times. Notice that the question wasn’t “should I forgive,” but it was “how many times do I forgive?” It’s not an option, if we are people of faith, whether to forgive, but only how long will it take us to forgive, and that we may have to make an effort of it. And that goes for forgiving God too. It may take us a while.

And so once again I am reminded by the quote by Marion Wright Edelman, founder of the Children’s Defense Fund, “Whoever said anyone had the right to give up?” John Lewis never gave up the fight, the good fight. RBG never gave up the good fight. And maybe we struggle with the question as to why we have to keep fighting, why Lewis had to be beaten and bloodied, why George Floyd and too many others to name had to be killed, why RBG couldn’t have even spent her last few days in peace without worrying about how her death would be politicized. And so maybe we struggle with needing to forgive you, God, for why we have to keep fighting, and why some cannot see your presence in the struggle. And the word of hope we seek is a word of the absence of a need to fight. We just want those green pastures and still waters, we are tired, surely if you intend good for the world, O God, there should be green pastures and still waters, there should be rest, there should be the lion and the lamb lying together in peace.

But even without the green pastures and still waters, even when they are only a distant promise while we stay mired in the struggle, we know that this mess we are in right now is not what God intends for us. We know this

because we know God, through Jesus we know that God is love and mercy and peace. We know this because of the still deep blues of the lakes and the rich greens of the forests, we know this because God created creatures who can create works of wonder, like Puccini's La Boheme and Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah and Monet's Water Lilies. We know this because we see God's goodness in the smile of friend and the glee of a child and the wisdom of an elder and the random kindness of a stranger. We know this in our hearts, that this mess we are in is not what God intends for us, and so we can forgive God for making a world where people have the choice of right or wrong and sometimes and too often choose wrong.

And forgiving God, we can get ourselves back up off the mat and dust ourselves off and get back to work. There is yet more work to be done, we know. God gathers us together here to worship, to get a little peace and loving support, but not just for that. God gather us together to send us out again. We get it wrong when we build our church buildings, we put in regular doors when we really should put in revolving doors, for it would remind us even as we gather that we gather so that we can be sent out again, for there is much work left to do. Maybe today we can't yet face that work, but we will. We'll forgive you, O Source of our Being, that you have set before us much work to do in your name.

Paul, writing to his friends in the church at Philippi, understood that they were struggling with the long-haul work of being the church in the world, when he wrote these words to them, "Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing."

We have been called to this work by the one who created us, who planted the seed of love and peace and hope in us, and yes, maybe we need to forgive God for setting before us the difficult task of fighting for others when that work seems endless and we are up against powerful foes. But then again, would we really want to be on the other side? Would we really want it to be all about us and our needs, damn the rest of the world? Would we really want to amass riches while others starved? Would we really want to live a life of hypocrisy, changing our tune to suit our circumstances and for expediency and power, all the while knowing that our words and actions

expose our self-serving callousness? Would we really want to snuff out the light of love and hope that is created in us?

So yes, there is more work to be done, and we were not just gathered into this community of faith for our own sakes but for the sake of others as well. And weary and tired and worried as we are, we can forgive God for the pestilences that seem to be upon us now, for we know that they are not truly created by God or intended by God. What was created by God, what was meant for our world by God, was love and peace and hope, and it is in us. Let us forgive God, let us dry our tears, let us gird our loins and let us go back out into the world, for our world needs us.

Let us turn our hearts and minds to God in prayer.

Merciful God, we come to this time of worship from the world, and we bring the world in with us, for it weighs heavy on our hearts, because we truly care, and because we know things could be better in our world. And so we offer in prayer today what is on our hearts,

We pray for:

- Those who are in need of healing, body and mind and spirit
- Those who mourn
- Parents and children, teachers and administrators trying to figure out schooling in these strange circumstances
- Families, and people living alone, each struggling in different ways in this pandemic and the forced togetherness or isolation it entails
- People struggling economically, especially those who have lost their jobs, that new paths are opened up to them
- Those fighting fires out west, and those whose homes and communities are devastated by the fires
- Those living in communities devastated by storms, that recovery is swift
- Those who fight for equity and justice for all, no matter the color of their skin, their gender identity, their country of origin, or who they love

Breathe new breath into us, O Spirit of the living God. Fall afresh on us. Help us to breathe new life and new hope into our communities, especially in these uncertain times. With each breath we take, help us to be filled with your patience, your hope, your joy, your strength, your courage, your love.

Moment of silent meditation...

With each breath we take in and exhale, help us to remember that it is through us that your love and mercy flow, that your hope and a vision for a peaceable community of mutual respect and caring will be made real, as we taught to us by the one we call messiah, son of the living God, who taught us to pray to you saying, Our Father...