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The Path to the Future

Luke 4:21

In his address to a Martin Luther King Day breakfast this week the Reverend Joseph Brown spoke of the terrible price we pay for being blind to the past. He said that when we fail to understand the past we cannot teach our children the path to the future. For this reason Brown is investing significant time and energy to write down the stories of his grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles. His goal is to reach the younger generations of his family with these stories of faith and courage in adversity. It is these family stories which tell us who we are and prepare us to meet the challenges of the future.

Brown's point had special resonance for me because I had just arrived back from a week in Kansas. We had been making preparations for our son's wedding which will take place in Topeka, Kansas in June. But while we were there I visited for the first time the grave of my great-grandfather in Topeka. His story had been buried by earlier generations of my family and has just been pieced together in the last ten years. He grew up in western Virginia in an area where loyalties were closely divided during the Civil War. He was opposed to slavery and enlisted in the Union Army. He participated in the First Battle of Bull Run which was a great disaster for Union forces who suffered huge casualties. I am not aware that my great-grandfather suffered any physical injury from that battle, but his experience of it left him scarred for life. After the war he married a young woman from a prominent Virginia family and they moved to Kansas in 1871 where they bought a farm and opened a general store.

After a few years in the new home in Kansas it became clear that my great-grandfather was suffering from a war-related mental illness, possibly some form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. When he was unable to run his farm and business he was committed to the Kansas State Insane Asylum in Topeka. He remained there for almost twenty years until he died in 1899 and was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave in the Asylum cemetery. When he was committed, his wife left the farm and moved to Kansas City with their five children ranging in ages from eleven years to one year. She had no income from her husband and career opportunities for women in 1880 were very limited. She took in boarders to survive. Further evidence of her depressing situation is found in the 1880 census which lists her occupation as washer woman. It is clear that my grandmother grew up in a poverty stricken household. But worse than the poverty was the stigma of her father's mental illness in the cultural context of 19th century America. Because of the stigma the family enforced a code of silence about my great-grandfather's condition and where he spent the last 20 years of his life. The code of silence remained in force over three generations covering 120 years.

Looking back it is clear that the key to survival for my grandmother's fatherless family was the church. It was the church which gave them a safety net. It was the church that helped bear their pain. It was the church that made sure that my grandmother knew that no matter how bad her circumstances she was a child of God.

This is the ministry to which Jesus points in the fourth chapter of Luke's gospel. Luke tells us that Jesus traveled to his home synagogue in Nazareth. After reading from the scriptures Jesus laid before the people his vision for ministry. Jesus does not see himself as a messiah in the conventional sense of the term in that culture. He has no calling to be a political or military leader. He is not interested in Israel's future as a major player on the world stage. Jesus' vision for ministry is tied to a more obscure concept of the role of the messiah. This concept is found in Isaiah 61, the passage Jesus chose to read. There we learn of a suffering servant who leads not by using the levers of power, but by bearing the pain of the human family.

As one who bears the pain of others, Jesus proposes to do what no political messiah could ever do. He will preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. Jesus envisions a ministry which assures people that they are no longer defined by their brokenness. Their identity will not be tied to their condition of being poor, captive, blind, or oppressed. It is grace and not brokenness that will determine who they are. The path to the future will be found in knowing that they are children God.

When Jesus reads these words from Isaiah he affirms an image of the messiah based not on power, but on servanthood. When he says "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled," he is putting down a marker for the kind of messiah he is called to be. He is forming a community which can bear the pain of those who are broken.

The path to the future that Jesus envisions emerges from the family stories of his people. In the 8th chapter of Nehemiah we find one of those family stories. We read that the exiles who returned from Babylon faced grim circumstances. Their brokenness was revealed in their poverty in the ruined country to which they returned. But it was also reflected in their separation from the religious and political institutions which had for so long defined Jewish life. No longer was there a King, a temple, or an altar on which to sacrifice. During their years of exile and again after their return they must get by without these institutions. They must find their strength in the nurturing power of family and community.

The Book of Nehemiah describes how returning exiles gathered in the public square before the Water Gate to listen to the reading of scripture. They gathered outdoors because there was no temple or synagogue in which to meet. Ezra the preacher rises to read from the Torah and the reading continues throughout the morning. As the people listen they begin to weep. They weep in their recognition that the scroll from which Ezra reads is the source of the hope which has held them together during these difficult years. It is the message of scripture that has sustained them in their brokenness. God's word has assured them that they are not defined by the tragedy they are living through. God's word tells them that they are defined by grace. They can grow and thrive as a community of grace which bears the pain of others. This is their path to the future.

Part of the story Joseph Brown wants to tell to the younger members of his family has to do with his childhood in the poverty stricken community of East St. Louis, Illinois. He went to a school run by Franciscan sisters. There they instilled in him a love of learning. But according to Brown, the greatest gift they gave to him was the understanding that neither racial injustice nor poverty would determine who he was. They made sure that he knew that he was a child of God.