

Now Is the Time, Love Is the Message!

Acts 16:16-34

Sunday, May 8, 2016

April Dinwoodie

I have to admit, for my very first experience as a worship presenter, you did not make it easy for me. When I read the scripture, at first I was stumped and then I was a bit terrified. I was not sure how I would find a way to bring the theme “now is the time, love is the answer” to life with this particular scripture at the centerpiece and make it all relevant to such a poignant day of celebration for all of the mothers and mother figures in our lives. However, in life whenever these sort of challenges come my way, I immediately think of my mom, Sandi Dinwoodie. You see, when you have such a strong and powerful force like her as well as so many other fierce women who love you like a daughter, in your corner anything is possible and there is always a way. As I sat with the scripture I became more and more determined and little by little it all began to come together.

I kept asking myself what do Paul, Silas, a Jailer, prison, a violent earthquake, a near suicide and turning to God and coming together in faith have to do with Mother’s Day and how am I to integrate our inspirational theme: Now is the time/Love it the message? For the past week or so I kept the preparation materials at the ready and every time I had a few minutes I would read and re-read the verses as well as the additional anecdotes provided to me as possible jumping off places. Believe it or not, I get a lot of thinking done on my daily commute from 118th street to 42nd Street on the NYC subway. One morning after a think on 2/3 train it hit me...I had the perfect connecting point for all of this and of course it came from my mother.

Before I get to that, I want to talk about three things complexity, courage and commitment... I believe they all apply to this passage, to Mother’s Day and our over all theme.

Let’s start with the tough one – Complexity.

One thing is very clear from the passage; Paul, Silas and the Jailer all wind up in complex situations. Things ultimately turn out OK, maybe even better than OK but there are moments when things are dicey, an unfortunate, unethical detention, a natural disaster and a moment when the jailer believes his life should be over because he has lost charge of his prisoners. Extremely complicated elements that make a resolve in faith feel that much more powerful.

Complexity is not often what we think about first when we think about Mother's Day. So often the message of mother's day/father's day and other celebratory days on our calendars are filled with meaningful but simple platitudes and quips beautifully and dutifully aimed our loved ones. But are we really honoring our relationships if we do not honor all parts including the complex parts? Especially related to those relationships that truly anchor us - our families, particularly our parents and those who play the role of our parents. With the beauty and joy, there is also complexity for so many of us on Mother's Day. As an adopted person, I am thinking about my mom, the only mom I know, all she is and all she does for me, my siblings, our extended family and community and at the same time, I am thinking about my birth mother, the woman who gave birth to me who has left the planet and I will only know through the few bits and pieces I was offered from her and now through those that knew her. Sometimes, when I get a bit too self-absorbed in my own complexity, I am reminded of so many others like the young people I work with in foster care who face far more challenging complexities with their relationships with moms, dads and extended family members. We all have challenges there is simply no way of avoiding it in life. For so many of us it is how we manage in the face of complexity that can ultimately define the most beautiful and complicated layers of our experiences. I can't help but think about the sage yet simple words of advice that so often come from my mom...one of my all time favorites is bloom where you are planted. One of the only ways I have been equipped to actually do this is to conjure up the next element, which is courage.

Courage is a necessary element in life and when life throws you "stuff" we so often have to muster as much courage as possible to take action. Without courage, how could Paul continue to walk his truth? Without our courage, how could the jailer embrace a completely new path of faith in the midst of such confusion? Courage! What makes the elephant charge his tusk in the misty mist, or the dusky dusk? What makes the muskrat guard his musk? Courage! What makes the dawn come up like thunder? Courage! Fun and meaningful words from the Cowardly Lion in the Wizard of Oz. It is fun to remember this classic character that was so in need of courage. Without it he felt he could do nothing! I kind of feel the same way. We need courage to make bold moves especially in the face of adversity. Sometimes, courage isn't about beginning something brand new, it is about staying right where you are.

In 1912 Ina Duley Ogdon a public school teacher with aspirations to be an evangelist, received an invitation to be a speaker at the very prestigious Sunday school training school in Lake Chautauqua. Having long felt God's calling on her life, she was excited at the possibility of motivating thousands of people for Christ. Bust as she was packing for the trip her father became seriously injured in a carriage accident. This forced Ina to cancel her plans. Though bitterly

disappointed, she was able to move through it and trust God has a purpose for her. She made up her mind to be a blessing wherever she was and she decided that if she could not minister and teach thousands she could be a blessing to one person – her father. During this time she wrote the hymn “Brighten the corner where you are.” Again, sometimes courage comes in unexpected packages and has unexpected rewards.

I think moms are some of the most courageous beings on the planet. I certainly think that applies to my mom and SO many moms I know that each and every day act with courage to protect their families. I most certainly tapped into my personal reserve of courage and that of my family when I decided that it was important to me to seek out information and a connection to my biological mother. And courage along with unconditional love would be what I needed to manage through finding her and ultimately being rejected by her. This is where the sage words of advice from my mother would be essential – bloom where you are planted. After much grief and working through confusion and pain, I found a way to create a flower in some dusty dust. I thought about others, especially young people in foster care and how they might be managing their complex life situations. If I had the love of a family, resources and so much support, how might young people who had far less be sorting through their lives and relationships? I planted a seed and a special mentoring program where adopted adults mentor to youth in foster care was born. This perennial has been blooming for over 15 years. The irony is always so often that the mentees always teach the mentors and I have gained so much perspective and understanding about my life through understanding their lives. My challenges paled in comparison to so many of theirs and yet we shared something so very powerful and we all were acting with courage to explore deep and meaningful relationships.

Now, how about commitment? The thing that is so often abandoned when the going gets tough and life is just too hard. It is clear that Paul’s commitment and love impacted the jailer. Paul was not going anywhere. In fact, he was committed to seeing to it that the jailer was saved. How often do we see this kind of commitment and love today? How often are we digging in and staying true to ourselves and our loved ones and even strangers who may need just a tiny shred of commitment via a kind act? How often are we committed to ourselves to be better, do better and bloom where we are planted? And most importantly, how are we committing to a relationship with God? One day several years ago, we did an exercise with our mentoring group. We put several characteristics both physical and human in a hat – everything from eye color and ability to problem-solve. We were all to pick elements out of the hat and think about where we likely received these traits. The first one I picked was “commitment and the ability to forgive” – I was immediately emotional – for me this was a doozy. It was my mom, that ultimately taught me to be committed and to forgive and the only way I could be

committed to holding my birth mother in a place of love is because my mom taught me how to do that. Have you ever really thought about who has imprinted the most on your heart, your life? How can we be inspired by the example of others who act out of love and commitment on behalf of others? That is ultimately what we see as the jailer embraces faith, love and a new life commitment.

When I think about complexity, courage and commitment – there are some things we can control and some we simply cannot. But we can always decide how we want to move through our lives and how we wish to be guided. When we can tap into the sage words of those that we love and recognize that now is always the time and love is always the message our lives even in the face of adversity have depth, meaning and a far greater reach and impact than we ever imagined. When we embrace the complexity with courage and commitment we grow, we work through the things that have the power to hold us down.

At the heart of all that I do and all that I am there are two women. I simply would not exist without one and can't imagine life without the other. All that I know and all that I am still discovering reflect both of my families, most profoundly in my commitment to children and families. As I move through spaces that are both professional and personal, I learn, I evolve, and I hope that my passion inspires others. It's not always easy, but few things in life that we are truly passionate about ever are.

I know that I could have never made it through such a difficult and unexpected outcome of the search for pieces of my beginnings and my identity without the fierce love of my mother, and at of my extended family and friends. Mostly day in and day out, it's the "bloom where you are planted" mantra that keeps me going!

On mother's day I hope we all find the courage and commitment especially when faced with complexity so that our individual love and our collective love can be realized. Perhaps then all of us can take what life throws at us and gracefully and gratefully brighten the corner where we are.