

Weaving Beloved Community: Redux

Romans 12:9-17

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Standing here in front of you today, I feel a little bit like Dorothy when she wakes up in her bedroom in Kansas and says, “Oh, Auntie Em...there’s no place like home”. I had a wonderful summer full of learning, reflection, prayer, and healing, and I’ve come back with renewed energy and hope for our church and our future. With all that said, it sure is nice to be among warm and familiar faces again.

You may remember that my travels during this time were funded by a clergy renewal grant from the Lilly Endowment. One stipulation of the grant is that the clergyperson learn or do something they normally wouldn’t have the time, funds, or opportunity to do. For me, that was learning to weave. At the same time, our congregation has been looking at next steps we might take in growing as a welcoming, inclusive and anti-racist church. So, a few church leaders and I wrote the grant proposal naming it “weaving beloved community”. Dr. King’s concept of the beloved community is another way of expressing what Jesus called the kingdom of God - a community in which all people feel loved and accepted, valued and respected. So, the idea of our grant proposal was that I would spend these summer months learning about building inclusive communities and also learning to weave. Our thought was that weaving could be a beautiful metaphor for building a strong, diverse, and compassionate community - a community which our society today desperately needs.

I think most of us are aware that we are living through a huge cultural shift in our country that has only accelerated since the pandemic began. One indicator of the shift is that people are disconnecting from each other and from the institutions which have historically brought us together in community including church.

At the same time as people in the U.S. are isolating themselves more, we are also becoming a meaner nation. This is something that has been troubling me for a few years, so I was fascinated to see an article by David Brooks in *The Atlantic* this month entitled “How America Got Mean”. The subtitle is “In a culture devoid of moral education, generations are growing up in a morally inarticulate, self-referential world”. Brooks tells of a restaurant owner who now has to throw someone out of his restaurant for rude behavior at least once a week and of a head nurse in a hospital who is losing staff because patients have become so abusive. Of course, the extreme version of this meanness is seen in acts of hate like the recent racist shooting in Jacksonville.

For years, I’ve heard people say that the church just isn’t relevant to people anymore. Yet, I believe this moment in time is when the church can become tremendously relevant again. In a culture that is increasingly disconnected, morally inarticulate, and self-referential, people are searching for community, moral goodness, acceptance, and love. They want a safe haven, an alternative to all the conflict and polarization out there. We can be that haven to all sorts of people if we truly are a community grounded in the teachings of Jesus.

Which brings me to weaving. When I started on this sabbatical leave, I had never woven anything more complex than an Easter basket made of construction paper. I quickly learned that

weaving has a vocabulary all its own. For example, when you weave, you have a warp and a weft. The warp is made up of vertical threads which are already attached to the loom. The weft is the thread that you weave through the warp to create color and pattern. The weft creates diversity and beauty. Yet, without a good, taut warp, you can't create anything. The warp is the foundation of the piece.

In the same way, you cannot create a strong, inclusive community without a solid foundation - a common understanding of what bonds the community together, the values and purpose. For us, as people called Christians, that foundation is the teachings of Jesus. Our scripture reading today is from the apostle Paul's letter to the early church in Rome. He is instructing them in what Jesus taught about living in Christian community. The first thread is to love genuinely or, as Eugene Peterson puts it in his bible paraphrase, *The Message*, "Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it." The second one is to love like family. And then, contribute to those in need. Welcome strangers. Bless people who harass you. Be happy together, cry together. Consider everyone as equal. Don't be defeated by evil but defeat evil with good.

Imagine if we were known out there as a community where whoever walks in our doors feels loved, honored, respected, equal, and cared for. Quite a contrast to what is happening in our culture today. We can do it by threading a strong warp, a strong foundation in Jesus.

Here is a second lesson about inclusive community that comes from weaving. Tension is necessary but is also a challenge. Without tension in the warp, the weaving becomes uneven and sags. However, with too much tension, any given thread might break.

The same is true in a church community as we challenge ourselves to grow, welcoming all sorts of people into our midst. Creating change always increases the tension. We've seen that as we have worked toward being a more inclusive congregation. We passed our welcoming statement sixteen years ago. And now again as we've worked on understanding racism and becoming an anti-racist congregation. We've felt the discomfort of facing our own biases and of recognizing how much we still have to learn. Yet, working with that tension is critical to creating a strong fabric.

Here is lesson three: Mistakes are inevitable. What will you do about them? In learning to weave, or trying to, I quickly learned that I don't like to feel incompetent. I'm not used to not being good at what I do because, at this stage in life, I mostly do things I can do well. But, oh my! I made so many mistakes in my weaving classes. It was hard not to get really frustrated and impatient with myself. I wanted it to be perfect the first time, which was, of course, completely unrealistic. I had never done this before. I had to learn to approach this new thing with curiosity and grace.

Of course, as we grow individually and as a community which reflects God's kingdom, we will make mistakes, too. We all bring our own personal histories into this community. We all have blind spots about ourselves. We all will be influenced at times by what is happening in the society around us. When we make mistakes, Jesus teaches us to offer grace to ourselves and to each other.

I encountered two very different approaches to mistakes in my two weaving teachers. My first teacher would say, "Well, you're going to need to go back and fix it". Now, what that meant

was undoing rows and rows of weaving to get back to where the mistake was made and correcting it- a painful and painstaking process. My second teacher would say, “Well, you could go back and fix it or you could leave it integrated into the fabric. You might find that you actually like the new pattern it creates”.

Either way, as we make mistakes on our journey toward being a community grounded in Christ, we need to be intentional about how we handle those mistakes. Do we go back and do our best to correct them? Do we examine them and see what we can learn or how we are changed by them?

Another lesson I learned early on is that you have to pay attention to the edges. In weaving, they are called selvages, and they are the source of many of those mistakes mentioned above. As you weave back and forth, it’s so easy to leave a loop on the edge or to miss the outermost thread on the warp, which leaves your fabric messy, or worse, with holes in the edges.

And isn’t this true of a beloved community, as well? The people on the edges are those mostly likely to be overlooked, their voices unheard. Whether they are people who are marginalized or just people who are new to our community, without being cared for and warmly welcomed, they may just slip away and leave the community completely.

Last but not least, it is the diversity in color and pattern that makes a beautiful and cohesive weaving. The patterns are what give the fabric texture and depth while the different colors bring out the beauty of each other. Therefore, every thread is necessary to the whole. If a thread gets broken or is missing, something is lost of what could have been, changing the pattern and the structural integrity of the fabric itself. We all are part of the fabric. Tune in next week as we begin a new sermon series about all the ways we are in ministry together as we celebrate the incredible beauty God has woven into our church and all creation.

May it be so. Amen.