

“Holding Space” – Henry Clarke

Ephesians 4:1-7

A Sermon for Lake Shore Baptist Church – June 23, 2019

Good Morning.

When I moved to Waco in the fall of 2017, one of the last things on my mind was finding a church, a little further down the list would be finding a Baptist church, and yet even further, were it to make the list, finding a liturgical church. Yet, here we are, and here I am, speaking from this pulpit and all I can do is thank God and each of you for this church for what it means to me. Like many here today, I believe that there are more lives to be welcomed, enriched, celebrated, and affirmed in the years to come. That’s why this season we find ourselves in, call it transition, call it change, call it something we don’t really like to say in church, is a time to be listening for, and sharing with one another, the subtle notes of grace while holding space for what is next in the life of Lake Shore Baptist Church. So, thank you for the opportunity to share with you this morning. Thank you for being the loving, welcoming and affirming church that I call home.

Last week, Bill Bellinger began his sermon by saying something I don’t believe I’ve ever heard a preacher say before and it struck me as deeply profound. He said, “I often think that the sermons I would hope to preach have in one way or another already been preached in this place.”¹

In thinking on Bill’s words as I prepared my own sermon, I considered our current culture of constant digital consumption. It seems we are continuously pressured into either creating or consuming, “fresh content” and “hot takes” on everything from the critical to the benign not realizing that certain lasting truths deserve curation and propagation as well. And I have come to realize my “hot take” may be “not-so-hot” after all. So, here’s my “not-so-hot” take today; It’s very likely Lake Shore has not only heard the crux of my message today, but you may have heard it more times me. The principle of holding space, although it may not have been said in

¹ Dr. Bill Bellinger - <http://lsbcwaco.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/GrandparentsSermon-by-Bill-Bellinger.pdf>

this way in the last six decades, seems to be in this church's DNA. In fact, it's one of the things I love about this body. There's something about a community of people who see a greater cause than themselves, a different path even if fraught with challenge, and a willingness to hold to what is right or confront what is wrong regardless of consequence. Whether holding an egalitarian view of men and women and living it, or confronting racism and social injustice in Waco and in other parts of the world, or standing for the priesthood of all believers, or declaring that, "God's love holds no bounds" in a time when "Othering" has strangely become a trend for many churches in America. Make no mistake, you have held space, you hold space for many, and it is something I pray never changes.

Before ever visiting here I took the time read Lake Shore's 50-year anniversary story. Since coming here, I've heard other parts of the story. That's why I know holding space is something Lake Shore is well acquainted with doing. So, I hope this sermon, as Bill said, "... is one already preached" and one you've heard, and possibly more than I have. So, bear with me this morning as this Methodist, turned Charismatic, now finding himself preaching in a Baptist church, plays a little catchup.

Writer Heather Plett says this about holding space,

"The space in between stories is the liminal space. In anthropology, a liminal space is a threshold, an interim space of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of rituals, when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet transitioned to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete. In liminal space we are between identities, between who we once were and who we are becoming, like the chrysalis stage between caterpillar and butterfly."

Now, I won't attempt to sing any show tunes today but Libby Bellinger's words for us on Pentecost Sunday and yes, the lyrics she sang from West Side Story have stuck with me:

"The air is humming, and something great is coming! Who knows?

It's only just out of reach, down the block, on a beach. Who knows?

Something's coming, I don't know what it is, but it is gonna be great!"

And, I believe Libby shared something prophetic with us two weeks ago when she said,

“Get ready Lake Shore the spirit is blowing through this place. Are you ready to be shaken up, blown about, and broken open?”²

Now these words should not cause alarm but comfort us in that we are called to trust God to be at work among us. (And we’ll get to that in a moment) But, “shaken up, blown about, and broken open?” How can these words be words of comfort and what does it mean to hold space in challenging times of transition and change?

Our Old Testament reading from Genesis today recounts the climax in the story of Joseph, which if you haven’t been told it by Andrew Lloyd Weber in Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, or by Larry the Cucumber as Little Joe, or like me, first hearing of Joseph’s coat from a Dolly Parton song, Here’s the big picture:

Joseph was Jacob’s first and favorite child of his favorite wife, Rachel.

He gave Joseph a coat of many colors to note his preference and the other sons weren’t thrilled about it. Because, you know..., brothers...

Joseph has a dream about his brothers bowing to him as well another dream about his brothers and parents bowing to him that he simply had to share with his jealous brothers. Because, you know..., brothers...

The brothers had just about enough of Daddy’s boy, that Technicolor coat, and all that bowing crap, so they sold him into slavery and faked his death. Because, you know..., brothers...

Joseph gets one of the better slave positions in Egypt but ends up in prison falsely accused of some craaa-zy diiii-cey things at his master’s estate. Because, you know..., Real Housewives of Egypt

Anyway!

² Libby Bellinger - <http://lsbcwaco.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Pentecost2019-by-Libby-Bellinger.pdf>

While in jail he meets some guys, who served pharaoh. They have dreams, Joseph interprets the dreams and they go as predicted. Pharaoh has a dream and Joseph interprets it. Joseph is made second in command of Egypt. When Joseph is shown by God that there will be seven good years of harvest followed by famine for seven years, Joseph opens a food bank. When the famine hits, his brothers come to Egypt to buy grain and Joseph is reunited with his brothers and father.

Joseph's family, especially his brothers, had all but written him off for dead or as good as dead and that, finally, brings me to my point about Joseph and holding space.

In a time of crisis, Joseph was not waiting for some climatic moment, to release bitterness and revenge, but he was holding space for forgiveness and redemption. When the circumstances of a famine could have destroyed these "strangers" aka his family or brought justice to his brothers in coming to Egypt, Joseph was there, holding space for them.

I want to read to you something from the Lake Shore's anniversary document and specifically from the history of the first twenty-five years:

"With the resignation of each of Lake Shore's pastors — Tolar, Gray, and Fleming — many members honestly thought that no one could be found to take his place. And, indeed, no one was found to "take his place." Each new pastor made his own place in the life of the church. So it would be again."

These five words, "so it would be again", resonate with us today as we find ourselves with similar sentiments of change or loss and in the continuing narrative of Lake Shore. I haven't been here long enough for these particular church life events as many of you have, but nevertheless here we are old guard and newcomer alike watching it, be again".

In writing on Grieving as a Sacred Space, Father Richard Rohr also talks about holding space when he says:

"It is when you are finally out of the way. It is when you are in between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. It is no fun. Think of Israel in the desert, Joseph in the pit, Jonah in the belly, the three Mary's tending the tomb.

IF YOU ARE NOT trained in how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust and wait-you will run-or more likely you will “explain.” Not necessarily a true explanation, but any explanation is better than scary liminal space. Anything to flee from this terrible “cloud of unknowing.” Those of a more fear-based nature will run back to the old explanations. Those who love risk or hate thought will often quickly construct a new explanation where they can feel special and again in control. Few of us know how to stay on the threshold. You just feel stupid there-and we are all trying to say something profound these days.”³

Now, I promised to get back to God being at work among us in this time and it also brings us back to our reading from Ephesians. This passage in Ephesians is one my favorite scriptures in one of my favorite letters. The prose that Paul uses in our reading today reflects his plea to a diverse church to hold space for one another. He uses this phrase, “bearing one another in love” for them holding space. He then reminds them why holding space is critical, that is the unity summarized in verse six:

“one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”⁴

He goes on to say each of us is given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift. And that is some good news about God’s grace at work in and for each of us as we hold space.

Now maybe the liminal space you find yourself in today has nothing to do with this Church or anything happening here. You may be holding space for something or someone in your own life, or some other kind of transition that you are in the middle of for the first or fiftieth time. If I could leave you with any thing today, it’s this; Bear with one another in love, the kind of love that holds no bounds and know that God’s grace means we can always be again.

³ Richard Rohr – Grieving as Sacred Space <http://www.jmm.org.au/articles/1266.htm>

⁴ Ephesians 4:6 - NRSV

So, we begin again, in this liminal space, holding it, despite the anxiety and ambiguity, for ourselves, for one another, for whomever God calls to this pulpit, for others coming to this community, and those throughout the world He calls to our hearts and our abilities to bless.

We hold space as the Spirit blows through this church. Even when shaken up, blown about, and broken open, we hold space, not knowing what we will become next.

And like the Ephesians, we will hold space in humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.

Amen