

Sermon September 11, 2016 Reconciled Cara B. Hochhalter

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28.....Luke 15:1-4, 8-10 and 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Lake Superior is bordered on the north by Canada and on the south by Michigan...it is the deepest and largest freshwater lake in the world...and once in a while, this lake serves up an agate. Now some people may think that those who spend hours walking along beaches looking for these illusive stones....have lost their marbles.

But Jeff and I had the great privilege of camping on the shores of this deep blue lake and looking for stones that are 1.2 billion years old....Agates formed in volcanic lava flows when rocks formed crevices into which poured layers of agate material forming tiny bands of different colors. The stones have been tumbled through the ice age and all these years....sometimes the outer rocks break away and a pure agate is left at the bottom of the lake or even in a field....stones with these intricate bands and lacy patterns have been found in Minnesota and Mexico, as well, but people come to the shores of Lake Superior .... looking for agates.

An owner of a rock shop in Grand Marais told us it has not been a really good year for agates because you need a solid ice buildup on the lake which scoops up these stones from the bottom and then in the Spring the winds push the ice flows closer to the shores where the summer waves... can then serve up these brilliant stones to rock hounds like us!

We found five small ones..."chippers" the lady called them....Jeff and I always argue about who found the prettiest ones...but when you find one....it somehow feels a little bit holy. All of the stones are beautiful as you walk along the shore but these lighter agates sometimes tumble in on a wave as though it is just for you, and when your eye catches the sun glinting through the translucent bands...it is thrilling.

Let us be in prayer: God of all creation, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together, be acceptable to you our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Jesus may not have looked for agates...but he tells the stories of the joy that happens when a shepherd looks for and finds a lost sheep...and the wonderful delight when a woman has swept her house looking for an errant coin...and then she finds it. You all know this feeling of relief and joy...when you find something you thought was lost!

Perhaps Jesus was talking about us...about how sometimes we are lost and we are out there disconnected to our Holy Source in God...and then how happy *God* is in

finding US! How thrilling is that reconnection, that reconciliation that no matter what we have done, there is a greater love...who has our back!

Although someone using the name of the Apostle Paul, probably actually wrote this letter supposedly to Paul's associate, Timothy...nevertheless....it was included in the Bible for its truth about the thrilling nature of being reconciled...relieved of blame and guilt!

Paul had persecuted those who followed Jesus, he admits to having been a violent and angry man...but after his conversion on the Road to Damascus...he is exuberant in this letter, telling of his gratitude that in the love of Christ, he has been forgiven. Whether God has found him or he has found God...either way, Paul wants to shout it out! And who wouldn't! Holy forgiveness is definitely a gift!

Paul says that in spite of his "ignorant unbelief," God has dabbled him with mercy and the grace overflowed him with the faith and love that are in Christ! Sounds a little like a testimonial, doesn't it! I sinned, God forgave me...and I am happy to tell you about it!

William Matthews writes that sometimes we are a little uncomfortable with other people's testimonials. Sometimes we don't know whether to really believe them. Or maybe we are a little jealous that we have not had such revelations! Matthews says, "Whatever the reason, our neighbor's news that he or she has *seen the light* sometimes elicits more queasy stomach than glad heart."

I don't know...how do you feel when someone shares a spiritual experience...a moment of clarity around a deeper truth? Sometimes it is described in theological language that I might not share...but I rather like hearing these stories and try not to be skeptical nor judgmental because, really...what do we know? All things just may be possible...in the greater mystery of God! Someone just told me the other day about a relative of hers who was so filled with faith that she told a man to hold his hands over his car that wouldn't start and pray...and then it started! Well?? All things just may be possible in the mystery of God.

However it happens, like the man finding his sheep, the woman discovering her lost coin, or Paul receiving forgiveness after his violent behavior....God's mercy is something around which to rejoice! I think these are moments of clarity and connection to Holiness...God who always longs for our wholeness....and in these moments lie deep grace in which we can find the hope to carry on.

As a community of faith... we can help each other reconnect, over and over, with God's Infinite and Forgiving Love. And then, we are able to love and forgive others, too...but it is not always easy.

Fifteen years ago today, a terrible thing happened in our nation... how do we look at 9/11 with hearts of compassion and forgiveness? Certainly compassion for the families of the thousands of people who died, certainly compassion and pride for the hundreds of emergency workers, fire and police and ordinary citizens who assisted others in this disaster... but now here is the very challenging part...

Can we possibly hold any kind of forgiveness for those who planned this attack? I would think that most of us still hold a deep, deep hurt and even an outrageous anger. These acts seemed to be ones of revenge...but did our country ever really and honestly explore--- the reasons why? I heard something about our military bases being built on land considered Holy, near Mecca...or something about their perception that our western way of life was sinful?

There is no condoning what happened to so many innocent people that day...and yet in the largeness of God's love, I am not sure we really tried to understand...to look at the whole picture, perhaps to even recognize if some of our own actions led to these terrible events. I don't know?

Instead, our country responded by trying to link Saddam Hussein and then *we* started a war with Iraq that killed more than 150,000 people and over 4,000 young men and women of our own country ... How do we deal with 9/11 in our minds and hearts?

One of the people we stayed with in Michigan is a wonderful woman whom I have known since my youth, named Debbie Hindle. She lives in Scotland 6 months of the year and northern Michigan the other 6. She is a couple years older than I and she inspired me when she was in college and went off to Kenya to study baboons!

Last week she told us that this year she went to Rwanda with a group who followed trackers into the jungle to study a family of gorillas! But she also told me about the amazing reconciliation process that is still going on in Rwanda where terrible atrocities happened between the Tutsis and Hutus. In 1994, up to 1 million people were killed and thousands traumatized by rape and the destruction of homes.

An ambitious Justice and Reconciliation process has the ultimate aim that all Rwandans once again will live side by side in peace with one another. Debbie told me

how incredibly moving it was to hear stories of how people are facing one another, people who could so easily see the other as enemy, but they are facing one another to fully hear their stories. In all honesty, they are taking responsibility for the ways they have wronged one another and ...they are finding great power in the process of forgiveness. And it is their Christian faith that plays a huge part in these efforts....they are looking to the same stories that we hear of the forgiveness offered by an Infinite God and a living Christ.

You all know of the incredible peace-maker, Bishop Desmond Tutu, who facilitates a similar Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa since the end of apartheid there.

As we struggle with forgiveness in our own hearts, whether it regards 9/11 or in other relationships of our lives, perhaps these words from Desmond Tutu can help us: He said: *To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is also a process that does not exclude hatred and anger. These emotions are all part of being human. You should never hate yourself for hating others who do terrible things: the depth of your love is shown by the extent of your anger.*

*However, (this is Desmond Tutu speaking) when I talk of forgiveness I mean the belief that you can come out the other side a better person. A better person than the one being consumed by anger and hatred. Remaining in that state locks you in a state of victimhood, making you almost dependent on the perpetrator. If you can find it in yourself to forgive --- then you are no longer chained to the perpetrator. You can move on, and you can even help the perpetrators to become a better persons too.*

Powerful words....on this day.

In spite of news that often seems bursting with brokenness...we must look for signs of God's infinite love, beauty and forgiveness that break into our every day! Let us shout out about the ability to turn mistakes into lessons learned...let us proclaim with joy, the brilliance of God's love that is served up for us just like an agate on a beach...!

I will close with a prayer from Iona:

O God, open to us today the sea of your mercy---And water us with full streams---From the riches of your grace---And springs of your kindness.---Make us children of quietness and heirs of peace---Kindle in us the fire of your love---Sow in us awe---Strengthen our weakness by your power---And bind us close to you and to each other. Amen.