

“Staying Power”

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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The Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

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John 14:15-21

Two weeks ago, Hoshiko Ito in worship sang the solo “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.” Hoshiko-san’s deep alto moaning the words, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home” evokes the kind of feeling the disciples might have had when listening to Jesus tell of his departure. The song goes back to the African-American gospel tradition, when slave children would be sold to live away from their mothers and families, like money-making property-- not like humans with essential bonds that create life’s web of meaning.

Even as adults, many people rely on our mothers, as much as we can. For the Asian new mothers in our area, many feel strongly the absence of a mother as it is the tradition for the grandmother to stay with the family for several months when a grandchild is born. I was walking in downtown Leonia looking for a baby gift for my friend Stacy’s baby, so I stopped into a store called “Mom’s Care.” Turns out this was not the kind of place that sells baby gifts. Instead, it is a service that does the grandmother’s job for women who have just had a baby and are oceans apart from their own mothers. It tries to recreate those kinds of bonds that give society structure and life meaning. In our church we recreate that web somewhat; I have seen longtime church members at holidays gather a mismatched banquet of strangers and friends, many of whom are far from family. If you are on facebook and saw that Wanangwa broke the freshman sprinting record at a track meet yesterday, you see several church members sprinkled in the long list of Malawian names cheering him on.

Jesus for the disciples had offered a web that created life's meaning. He was their leader and their guide, the one who mattered enough that they would leave their families and leave their fishing nets and follow him. What they left behind was brought back to them, in the depth of relationship Jesus helped them find with God, with Jesus, with friends, strangers, enemies, and even within themselves. And yet this section of verses is part of a larger series of speeches Jesus makes to his disciples, predicting his departure from them. What would happen to what they had built together? Were disciples racking their brains, testing to see if they would remember the parables just as Jesus told them? Could they muster the persistence with which he reached others, and the passion he called forth?

Someone once told me long ago that one mark of an excellent leader is that the organization does well, and can even flourish, after the leader leaves. This idea seems counter-intuitive; after all, if the leader is so great, wouldn't those shoes just be too big to fill? Wouldn't the next light seem like just a flicker if what we remember is a brilliant sun? But the idea has stuck with me for some reason, and over the years what I have witnessed to be true is that a good leader encourages light from others. I believe this kind of leadership was in place before I got here, and I still reap the blessing of that which still shines here after she has left.

Jesus promises that he will not leave his followers without light. "I will not leave you orphaned," he tells them, and he promises to send the Spirit of Truth. We will know the Spirit, Jesus promises, because the Spirit will abide in us. Jesus' love for us has staying power. It lasts even when he is physically gone from us. Gail O'Day, who taught at my seminary, said that followers do not tap into the special thing they had with Jesus "by clinging to a cherished memory of him, or by retreating into their private experience of him." By doing these things, we might miss the ways Jesus' light burns, through the Holy Spirit, in unique ways today.

If you were here last night, you saw many lights burning. I honestly did not know what to expect when Max asked me if he could use the church to put on a concert with a bunch of his musician friends, as a fundraiser for the library. But Max carries enough light within him that when he asks for something, a yes answer is a pretty safe bet; the Session agreed. Max's opening speech about the library's meaning to the community brought tears to my eyes. I love to read, but I don't think I had ever cried about libraries. Two songs into the concert an older person in the pew behind me tapped my shoulder and said "if this is who is in charge of our future, we are in good hands." While their songs were not religious, one person sang a song she had written about heaven; another sang "Feelin' Good," a song made popular by Nina Simone. The lyrics: "It's a new dawn, it's a new day, it's a new life, and I'm feelin' good" speak to me of the power of resurrection, and there was something in the way the young woman sang that song that convinced me it was true for her. It felt awesome to have our sanctuary full of teenagers and young adults, and I hope we as a church can continue to find ways to encourage their light and maybe even see it as something spiritual and holy.

As I think about how I want my leadership to move forward here as your installed pastor, I hope I can help you find ways to receive and shine holy light. It is the light of Jesus' love. It is the light of God's presence. It is the light of the Holy Spirit's truth. It is the light that broke across your faces at the moment of Sia's baptism. But at times, any of us might feel distant from that light. In this community of practice, we can point each other back to the light. We can blow air on what might seem like a flicker until it sparks into a flame. Jesus said "If you love me, keep my commandments." This is the way to recharge with this light. Jesus' commandments were simple: Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. On these two hang all the law and the prophets. When we do this, we invite the light of Jesus into our midst. We may even shine like him. In our practice, may we all find a staying power that will never let us go. Amen.