

Faith From Here to There
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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I want to title the sermon I share with you today, “Faith From Here to There.” On World Communion Sunday, we want to celebrate a faith that extends from here in this sanctuary, this table, to every nation of the world in the global expressions of Christianity. Susan Shanno so carefully designed our spread with breads representing every culture— well, at least the ones she could find at Shop-Rite. While we sit in our cozy sanctuary, others pray in lofty cathedrals, while others worship on an outdoor slab of concrete sheltered by a banana leaf roof, and still others praise in a secret house church. Some churches serve other functions: they are coffee shops, movie theaters, schools. We know these days some from this congregation and many others worship from their offices and living rooms, joining church from computers, iPads, and TV screens. No matter what makes your pew, or if there even is a pew, we are joined into one body through the bread and wine.

What calls us together from so many different places, to profess such faith? It is hard to explain, but we are beginning a year of trying to make sense of it with our new class of confirmation youth that began their exploration in classes this morning. What is so compelling about following this person called Jesus Christ?

Paul’s letter to Timothy, a young preacher whom he had mentored, tries to remind Timothy of the faith and love that has power beyond the sufferings they are experiencing. Remember the ancestors in Babylon? Remember the faith of your grandmother Eunice and your mother Lois? It lives in you now. Remember when I laid hands on you, transferring the power of the Spirit on your life? Remember Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light? Paul’s letter reminds me of someone who is trying to rekindle the spark of a love found long ago. Remember what made us first fall in love? Remember the way we used to woo each other? Remember that time we first held hands? He does so with absolute faith that the spark can swell to a flame again and again.

Paul’s passion for this faith, even in the midst of the darkest moments, recalls the faith of the ancestors of Israel, who found a way out of no way to proclaim praise. As go the words from Lamentations— a whole book of lament about the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of its people— “The memory of my suffering and homelessness is bitterness and poison!” And yet, just a couple verses later, the writer proclaims, “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Similarly, though Paul wrote to Timothy from a prison in Rome, where he figured he would probably die, he spoke words of hope, passion, and love, for a story that he knew would continue far beyond him.

The faith of the Jewish people, and the followers of Jesus after that, journeys in that liminal space between homelessness and hope, between bitterness and blessedness, between doubt and devotion. In other words, it is also a faith that reaches from here to there: from the places where we are, to the places for which we hope and to which we are called. I am convinced that that space in-between is where God works best. Perhaps that is why confirmation traditionally happens with 12-15 year olds; they know firsthand the peaks and valleys of joy and despair, and are primed to find a way to live in that liminal space. This is as good a time as any to confront and be confronted by God.

One thing I am afraid of, however, is that questioning teenagers will expose the absurdity of Christian faith. Sometimes, I feel like Harold Hill in *The Music Man*. If you have never seen the show or the movie, Harold is a traveling salesman in the American Midwest in the early 1900's. He lands in a small town in Iowa, and over a number of weeks convinces them that what the youth of the town need for their wholesome development is a marching band. He sets about, peddling clarinets, tubas, flutes, trumpets... each child begins to dream of greatness as they wait for the musical instruments to arrive. Even the mayor's wife gets recruited into leading her gossipy friends in a dance troupe to go along. Here's the thing: Harold Hill knows *nothing* about music. His plan is that once the instruments and marching band uniforms arrive, he will skip town with the townspeople's money, leaving them with everything they need for a marching band EXCEPT the ability to play the instruments. However, a local piano teacher sniffs him out for the shyster that he is, and it looks like she will expose his scheme. Even so, she sees the impact that *hope* has on the entire community, including her little brother who has come out of his protective shell with all the confidence that imagining himself as a band member gives him. Not only that, it seems she is falling in love with him, because, well, Broadway. Someone else exposes Harold Hill's fraud— but just before they carry him away to be tarred and feathered, a troupe of children in band uniforms and instruments proudly marches in. They start playing. It sounds absolutely terrible! But one by one, the townspeople exclaim with delight, "Look at them play!" "You sound amazing!" "That's my boy!" with joy and appreciation as if it were the crowd coming to hear the New York Philharmonic when it reopens in the newly designed David Geffen Hall this week.

Sometimes I wonder if I am just like Harold Hill. Am I, as your pastor, peddling hope in something that doesn't exist? Is that what Paul was doing too, in all those letters sent around across land, sea, and time? And, if the church is peddling hope in something that doesn't exist, are you *really* buying it? I mean, these claims of our faith are pretty incredible: an unseen God, a goodness that each day evil tries to challenge, a beloved community when all we can see is distrust and division, a resurrection that defies what we know of this physical world, a mercy and forgiveness when the itch we want to scratch is revenge, a love for neighbor when it is hard to even love ourselves.

Some theologians also acknowledge the absurdity of faith in God, while acknowledging that the *practice* of faith has something important to offer. A few years ago a couple of students from Harvard Divinity School formed a podcast that was sermons based on the teachings out of the *Harry Potter* series. Without using the Bible or God, they drew out themes that were of

universal, and, some would say, spiritual importance: community, friendship, rebirth, confronting the evil forces outside of us, and also inside of us— all with a text that is completely fictional.

I think this podcast, called “Harry Potter and the Sacred Text,” is actually pretty cool.

But I also believe there *is* something more. I believe it, because I have found God in those places between despair and delight. My faith in Jesus has called me into resurrection when all I knew was death. Not only that; like Timothy, who did not stand on his own in the shakiness of faith, but stood on the strength of his grandmother Eunice, his mother Lois, his mentor Paul— I know *I don't stand alone* in the testimony of Christ, and neither do you. For those of you sitting in the pews here, there are *at least* 5 generations of butts that sat here before you, praying, singing, doubting, passing notes, confessing, communing, blessing. Each Sunday, churches around the world find space to grapple with their everyday needs, challenges, and joys, and invite God to be part of that as they seek to follow Christ, and we are connected to them too.

That faith in a journey that can bring us from here to there is universal. It is why so many people risk everything to cross borders into this country, in hopes for a better life.

Last month, a plane filled with 50 people, who were fleeing political persecution, gang violence, and/or abject poverty, landed in Martha's Vineyard. As these immigrants deplaned, it was clear they weren't in Boston— the city where they were promised they were being sent. And, they weren't met with jobs and resettlement advisors, as they had been told when they were lured to sign on to this trip. It turns out, they were victims of human trafficking— yet another one of the indignities, most of which go untold— they experienced in their path of determination to make a better life.

In the next day, other shipments of humans were dumped at the home of the Vice President, and such dumping of immigrants across state lines continued until storm season got politicians distracted with the needs flooding their own states.

Okay, Florida, okay, Texas. Give us in the East Coast your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, longing to breathe free. Those you called wretched, refuse, teeming your border? We will learn to call them neighbor, co-worker, friend. Even family.

If it weren't for the storms already disrupting your lives, I'd offer that we can give something too: how about a truckload of our spotted lantern flies? We have plenty.

The truth is, immigrants are not an invasive species. That is the racist assumption of the stunt politicians played them for, but our faith tells us otherwise. And when humans are treated like the butt of a joke, a pawn in a political game, that is simply not funny. These are people with hopes and dreams and fears, just like any of us. They are just trying to make it, from here, to there.

And, as quickly as we can jump to judge states that offload immigrants as if they are invasive species, how quickly can we put our money where our mouth is? How quickly can we shuffle to extend the communion table, so everyone gets served and fed as needed? Elder Keyla Garcia will soon be speaking about our Peace and Global Witness Offering, a portion of which will go to Church World Service, which is helping to house, resettle, and find jobs for immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers right here in North Jersey— people very much like those who arrived in Martha's Vineyard last month.

It makes me proud that the place where these trafficked immigrants ended up on the day they deplaned was an Episcopal church. It became the hub for shelter and care. Volunteers swarmed there to help provide foods that taste familiar to Venezuelan tongues. They provided shelter. They played with traumatized children. Here is a vision of the church doing what we are called to do: taking what some feel is an impossible task, and envisioning it as a reality. I realize the struggle for immigration justice is **so much** bigger than one plane-load of people welcomed; it's just a taste of the mercy and love that we can offer. But similarly, the bread and the juice of our sacrament is just a *taste* of the beloved community to which Jesus calls us, a taste of his presence here among us, a taste that transports us from here to what and who we are called to become. Once we have a taste of something so holy and good, how can we not have an appetite for more?

This is the vision of the table Jesus sets, which welcomes everyone from every place.