

Unimaginable

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The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

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Romans 8:26-39 and Mathew 13:31-33, 44-52

The original intent of this morning's sermon was to continue a kind of unofficial series on Jesus' parables, with Austin so helpfully considering the sower and the seeds and the ground, and Brian equally as helpfully considering the implications of the mustard seed parable.

This morning's gospel lectionary from Matthew gives us not 1, not 2, not 3, not 4 but 5 brief, pointed parables, Jesus' pithy effort to make the gospel accessible to the growing and largely agrarian audience. If there is a theme to them – and remember, parables are open invitations for imaginative interpretation – it's that small things (seeds, a little yeast, a hidden treasure) can make huge and unexpected and vital differences. Remember that – believe that – do that – be that. That was the plan.

And yet if I am paying attention to my own experiences, and yours in this pandemic moment, and at the risk of projecting too much, Paul's words to the church at Rome strike a deep, deep cord.

I've read about the realities of the pandemic, the lamentation, the grieving, the trauma, whether you've been directly affected or not, that is, whether you've been infected, or known someone who has, or worse. Mental health is impacted as much or more so as physical health.

As much as you tell me you're doing fine – and many of you are on all of the measurable metrics – still there is trauma. Still there is grief. Personal and communal. I, for one, have found myself tearing up every so often at unexpected moments, along with the expected ones. That may be TMI, but it may also be your experience.

- The TV show "Bones," is a favorite exercise bike show. The formula: a murder, romantic banter, science, detective work. Watching an episode just the other day, a character died. I found tears welling up. Tears, over the death of a fictional TV character in an episode I had already seen several times! I shook my head and chuckled just a bit.
- Tears formed when I, with you, heard the news of Representative John Lewis' death, and I read and I watched and mourned for all of the civic and historic reasons. But I also thought of all those men I knew for whom pancreatic cancer was such a devastating diagnosis.
- I drove to Washington a week or so ago for a socially-distanced dinner with our daughter Ann. I arrived a little early and so crossed the bridge to visit Arlington National Cemetery. I figured it would be closed, but wondered if I could drive around a little. No, I

was politely told. As I turned the car around I caught a quick glimpse of several rows of the iconic grave markers. Again, tears formed in my eyes and I thought of all of those women and men, now gone, who had served the highest purposes of our national vision, liberty, justice, freedom.

- With a laptop and HDMI cable, we joined much of the universe and watched “Hamilton,” whose soundtrack was already imprinted on our souls. So many iconic songs. “Alexander Hamilton.” “The Room Where It Happened.” “What Did I Miss?” “You’ll Be Back.” “Not Gonna Waste My Shot.”

In the second act, we hear a haunting song, “It’s Quiet Uptown,” sung by Alexander Hamilton and two of the Schuyler sisters.

Eliza sings:

“There are moments that the words don’t reach
There is suffering too terrible to name
You hold your child as tight as you can
And push away the unimaginable...”

And that word, “unimaginable,” persists, sung time after time, a chant, a prayer. What is unimaginable here is that Alexander’s and Elizabeth’s son, Philip, has been killed in a duel, a senseless death. It is tragic, and we know it is an equally tragic foreshadowing to Hamilton’s own death, in a duel.

And the unimaginable continues. Sometimes we hear numbers and are numb to them and they simply do not register.

More than 600,000 have died from the coronavirus around the world. 600,000.

As of a day or so ago, 144,000 have died in the United States. 144,000. Imagine Bridgeport, CT or Joliet, IL or Tallahassee, FL simply disappearing. 144,000.

Many have died with no loved ones at their bedside, depriving both the comforted and the comforter those final tender moments.

Many of those deaths have happened without the customary and comforting pattern of ritual to follow – a community gathered in grief, a funeral or memorial service.

When my pastoral colleagues gather on Zoom calls we talk about this stuff, online memorial services, socially distanced graveside services for the very smallest of congregations, families putting off planning altogether because there is no way even to begin to think about a date. Vulnerability, trauma, grief are normal parts of living and dying. Yet this is magnified by the enormous scale and intensified by the context.

Along with waving a magic wand to find a vaccine, I would wave another magic wand to allow families, and congregations, and communities to grieve, properly. When we are able to gather again together in our sanctuary, I hope we can mark all of this in some way – those many who

have died, those we know who have died, those who have suffered in some way, those left to grieve.

144,000.

Whether on the world stage or in our own hearts and spirits, the unimaginable happens and causes trauma and grief and there are moments that the words don't reach.

What do we do?

So this is our job. To gather. To remember. And when we can't gather, to remember anyway. To name our own grief and trauma and to journey in solidarity with all who suffer.

And we do not *gather* without resources.

And we do not *remember* without resources.

Paul's letter to the church at Rome is his magnum opus, Paul at his rhetorical best. Romans chapter 8 is a beautiful, profound summation of the gospel.

Like a good lawyer, he builds his case. We are weak, we suffer. Yet we wait in hope, we live in hope. And when that fails, the Spirit intercedes for us, as Paul says, "with sighs too deep for words."

There are times when I want Paul in the room where it happened to help us understand how, as he says, "All things work together or good for those who love God," but I would rather cling to that vision than its alternatives.

And while we can get lost in the language of predestination, especially we who have John Calvin in our balcony, that's not Paul's eventual destination. His point is not really a point, but an affirmation, and a prayer, a progression from our weakness and suffering to God's claiming us, knowing us, loving us.

It builds and builds. Who can condemn us? Only God – and God doesn't. Who can make us right before God? Only God – and God does. Who will separate us from the love of God? It's more than a rhetorical question. When we feel unloved, when we *are* unloved, when we are beset by all kinds of hardship and heartache: distress, famine, persecution, peril, sword – I would add COVID 19, cancer, hunger, racism – nothing can separate us from God's love. "For I am convinced," Paul writes, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That's what gathers us, allowing us to remember and to grieve. The words are often read at memorial and funeral services, which this is, this moment, in a kind of way. And the power is not, ultimately, in the words, as powerful as they are, but the promise that creates them and the love that makes them real.

That love comforts us when death comes. It gives us freedom to live as if death does not have the final word; because it doesn't. We should not use those words to brush death off, nor to inoculate us from its reality. But if nothing can ever separate us from God's love, then love wins, not death.

And if love wins, then Paul's words provide us with an ethical mandate to make that love real for others, even in the face of Paul's litany of persecution and hardship and distress, so that all of God's beloved children can experience this very love more fully and more freely.

Because not only is our job to grieve and remember. It is this: never to allow the unimaginable to become the imaginable. Never to allow violence, or brokenness, or a pandemic or the narrative of our personal struggles, to become the acceptable status quo. That's what this love calls us to do.

Later in that brilliant "Hamilton" song, Alexandria sings:

"There are moments that the words don't reach
There is a grace too powerful to name
We push away what we can never understand
We push away the unimaginable..."

We begin with the unimaginable. Then we imagine, with a grace too powerful to name.

One of my favorite Presbyterian ordination questions – they are all my favorites but some are more favorite! – asks the respondent if they will serve the people with "energy, intelligence, imagination and love." Energy, intelligence, imagination and love.

It is more than an ordination question, that in the face of 144,000 pandemic deaths, in the face of every kind of loss and diminishment, we have been given the gift of imagination, whereby we can imagine, push away the unimaginable, remember and grieve with vulnerability, weep with those who weep, including ourselves, and then move to that deep, deep love from which nothing can separate us.

The gift of imagination.

My short term, limited imagination is this: some kind of safe return to church, baseball with fans in the stands (though I kind of like the cardboard cutouts), the demanding complexities of back to school worked out for students, teachers, families.

My medium term imagination includes real progress on this dreadful virus and real progress on the crisis of racial injustice we all face, and the kind of beloved community that makes it all possible.

Long term imagination? Who knows? But what if we joined our imagination with God's, first to push away the unimaginable, and then to *imagine the imaginable* based on the good news that nothing can separate us from God's love. A grace too powerful to name. A hope too powerful to name. A love too powerful to name. Just imagine. Amen.