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Matthew 16:21-27
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Eugene Peterson wrote, “Whenever we are associated with greatness over a long period of time, there is a tendency in us to become stale” (Five Smooth Stones For Pastoral Work pg 3). In his book Five Smooth Stones, he describes the dilemma Jewish Rabbis faced in keeping the Passover observance from becoming stale. The Rabbis realized the people in their synagogues were recounting the amazing journey of their deliverance from Egypt to the land they were promised with surprising boredom, and they set out to find a way to engage the people again with the story of God’s presence in their midst. Keeping things fresh is not an easy task.

When food becomes stale, it loses its crispiness and flavor. This is a truth my husband, Andy, works with me tirelessly to try to help me develop the habits required to preserve freshness. He has a collection of twist ties on a

magnet on the fridge and keeps the chip clips close at hand as he polices the chips, crackers, bread, even our dog's food to make sure they are closed up tight! If it's been opened, it must be sealed properly. Admittedly, I don't always appreciate his attention to freshness; in fact, I may have rolled my eyes on more than one occasion as he handed me a clip before I'm even finished getting chips out the bag! It can be annoying, even painful, living with what I might term hypervigilance; that is until I reach for the sleeve of saltine crackers, which are appropriately sealed and they are as they should be: crisp and tasty rather than stale and bland.

Staying alert to what makes us stale to the presence of God in our lives requires more than a chip clip. How do we maintain a fresh relationship with God? It's easy to become stale to the astounding reality that we are participants in God's divine story.

A few years ago Andy, Abbey, and I traveled to London and Paris for Abbey's senior trip. Before leaving on our trip, we booked tickets to the Harry Potter Excursion, which included a trip to Oxford to see where scenes were shot for the movies as well as a visit to the studio and museum.

We were delighted to discover that our friends would be in England at the same time and their daughter would be able to join us for this excursion. Our families were staying in different locations in London, so we planned to meet up at the tour bus's departure point.

If you have traveled on the trains in London, *you* already know that London's train system has circle lines, which loop the city and direct lines, which go from point to point. By the end of our day, we would also know this information, but we didn't start the day with this awareness.

We set off early from our hotel and headed to the train station. We boarded what we believed was the correct train and headed out on our big adventure. While traveling down the tracks, I decided to make use of my time and opened my phone to read the daily office. I read one of my favorite passages from Proverbs: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your path.” This scripture has been a source of great comfort throughout my life. Regardless of how precarious the path before me seems, these words have served as grounding reassurances that God is the master guide for the journey.

The train operator’s voice over the speakers interrupted my reflection as she announced that at the next stop, all the passengers must exit the train because we had come to the end of the line. *This is when we learned the difference between circle lines and direct lines.* The Direct line we had boarded ended before we reached our

destination, and the only recourse was to go back to the station where we started and get on the circle line.

Thankfully, because of our early start, we still had time to get that train and meet our tour on time.

We returned to the station, boarded the correct train, and set off again. Not long after leaving the station, the train suddenly came to a complete stop in between stations. After about five minutes or so, the train operator announced, that the train was experiencing functional issues and another train would be arriving soon to pick up the passengers.

I checked my watch. We had 30 minutes to reach the destination.

My stress was rising and compounded by the fact that our friend was already at the departure point and had boarded the tour bus.

After what seemed like forever, the other train arrived; we all boarded it, and we were off to make our connection. At our stop, we discovered there was no bus, no tour guide, no friend we were supposed to meet. We had missed the bus.

I called the booking agency to find out what we could do, to connect with the tour group. The agent explained that we would need to go to Paddington Station, switch trains to a commuter train to Oxford, and meet our tour group there.

Abbey texted our friend; she was fine and would look for us in Oxford.

As I was talking on the phone, I noticed a woman and her young daughter drift over to where we were standing. A young girl was crying and the mom looked distraught as her eyes darted around the area hoping to find their connection.

I asked her if she was looking for the Harry Potter tour and she shook her head. “We got stuck on a train that broke down,” she explained. I told her we had as well and were heading to Paddington Station to meet the group. I suggested she call the tour company as well, and she told me that her phone only worked with wi-fi. I offered my phone; she made the call, and we began making our way towards Paddington Station.

They sat in front of me on the train, and after calming her daughter by assuring her that it was all going to be okay, the girl dried her tears. The mom turned to talk to me and shared her story.

They had traveled from Canada for a long weekend to celebrate her daughter’s 10th birthday by going to the Harry Potter studio. She had saved her money to give her daughter this special trip. As a single mom, this was a big deal given her resources. She found flights, navigated international travel, found their hotel, and navigated her

way on the trains across London. It was all fine and good until this breakdown, outside of her control, had nearly caused them to miss the tour. They flew home tomorrow and could not have rescheduled. She remarked, “What a great coincidence that you happened to be there too. If we hadn’t run into you, we would have missed the tour.

We arrived at Paddington Station and found the commuter train required different tickets than the Oyster cards we had been using for the Tube. We learned, that not only is Andy great at keeping our food fresh, but quite astute at figuring out railways! He figured out what we needed to do, took care of buying all of our tickets, and handed them out to us all. The mom thanked him and promised to mail us the money for the tickets, to which Andy replied, “They are already taken care of. Don’t worry about it.”

He hurried us to find our train as it was leaving momentarily, so we all ran to make it aboard. Thankfully,

the trip to Oxford was uneventful; we met up with our friend, the tour guide, and the rest of the group, just in time to eat lunch. From there, we had a lovely day exploring the magic of Hogwarts and the incredible details of the Harry Potter movie sets. After a long day, we headed back to London on the bus.

On the ride back, the day's events swirled in my head. As I often do, I began ruminating on what went wrong in my travel planning. We had tried to take every precaution by getting to the train station early. How on earth did we miss the difference between the Circle Line and the direct lines? We should have asked someone who worked there or someone at our hotel for help. I let myself spiral into a lot of shoulds and finally huffed to myself, "If only we had taken the right train line to begin with, we wouldn't have had this kerfuffle!"

"True," I sensed God's voice entering the conversation, "but I needed you all to be my hands and feet to that young mom and her daughter today. They would have

been stuck, and your slight detour allowed me to love them today.”

My ruminations fell silent as the words from Proverbs I had read earlier settled my spirit.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your path.”

Though it took a different route than we expected, God’s perspective allowed me to realize we got to participate in a God adventure that day! It was not a coincidence but a divine interruption to the plans that we had made.

Each of us have stories of how humdrum became extraordinary, or how a twist of events led to a miraculous intervention. I feel sure that things happen to us every day that in this life, we will remain oblivious to how they fit into the plans of God. We live in a world where, through Jesus, God has made his home in our midst. We love God, speak of His goodness, and yet, it’s easy to see these

events as interruptions and get lost in developing our own strategies.

Today in our gospel reading we find Peter reminding us that we aren't the first to grapple with surrendering our expectations.

In the passage directly before the one in today's reading, Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, Son of the living God. So we know that he was aware of Christ's divinity. But as Jesus lays out his proposal, talking not of a victorious takeover, but of suffering, dying, and being raised on the third day, Peter is horrified. What is Jesus talking about? This is completely incompatible with the strategy to make Jesus king! Just when their movement was gaining momentum, Jesus rains on his parade with this talk of suffering and death. Though Peter had witnessed miraculous healings, seen Jesus feed thousands from a meager meal, and restore the demon-possessed, he still didn't get it. Peter demonstrates that

his trust in his own strategy outweighs his trust in God's path.

To Peter, the obvious strategy would be this: march on Jerusalem, pick up supporters on the way, choose your moment, say your prayers, fight a surprise battle, take over the Temple, and install Jesus as king. Obviously, that's how God's kingdom will come! That's how 'the son of man' will be exalted in his kingdom! That, we may be sure, was something like what Peter and the rest of the disciples had in mind. (Tom Wright, [Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 10.)

When Peter pulls Jesus aside to get him back on his path, Jesus rebukes him strongly by telling him, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me because you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but the things of man."

Whew! I feel the pain in that correction! Does that hit home for anyone else? When our eyes become clouded with self-interest or self-preservation, we can forge ahead just like Peter, developing strategies to deal with situations that do not lead us to finding our true selves in God, but lead us to greater isolation, pain and brokenness.

Jesus goes on to teach his disciples what God's path looks like.

Matthew 16:24–27

[24] Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. [25] For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. [26] For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?

Eugene Peterson puts it like this in the Message:

“Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; *I* am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?”

What Jesus didn’t say:

- Follow me and I’ll make sure you have the best of worldly treasures and never want for anything.
- Follow me and you will live without sickness or death.
- Follow me and you will be successful in all you do.
- Follow me and you’ll never get on the wrong train again.

Instead, Jesus promises whoever follows him must:

- take up his cross.
- lose his life.
- embrace suffering

This is not a teaching that makes for millions of subscribers on social media platforms, ***but it is what makes us saints.*** It is what transformed Peter from planning a military coup to following Jesus so completely that he lived out the call of Christ, suffering and dying on an upside-down cross for the cause of Christ.

While we may not face martyrdom, we will face suffering in one manner or another. We will miss trains, encounter sickness, deal with the loss of those we love, face financial hardships, endure painful relationships, experience rejection, or a vast array of other sorrows found in a broken world.

As we offer our sufferings to Christ, we are united to him. We rest in the truth that every tear, every broken heart,

and every sorrow we have suffered has been experienced by our Savior. He bore it all for us on His journey to the cross, where he died, and rose victoriously on the third day.

Augustine of Hippo wrote:

“God had one son on earth without sin, but never one without suffering.”

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Let’s think for a moment about binding our sufferings to the sufferings of Christ. This is an ancient practice which sounds mystical, but what does it really mean? Jesus tells his disciples in John 15, I am the true vine...Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

As I read these words, it stirred me to think about the grafting process in trees. Taking one tree and grafting in another to make a stronger version requires joining together the vascular tissue of each tree. The vascular tissue is not the outer bark; it's in the interior of the stem. The base part, which grows in the ground, is the rootstock, and the upper stem being grafted is called a scion (Si-on).

Both the rootstock and the scion must be cut at the same angle; the scion must be wedged into the rootstock, meshing the fibers of the separate parts, and then binding the together with a sealing compound so that the two trees can grow together as one. I don't know if trees feel pain, but if they do, it's a painful process. If the graft is successful, horticulturists look forward to a tree that produces fruit that is sweeter, more pest-resistant, or more drought-resistant than the trees were apart from each other.

Jesus's words to his disciples allow us to visualize this grafting process as we encounter sufferings that leave our souls feeling raw. The growth that takes place in us as we unite to the true vine, Jesus, the root of Jesse, produces fruit that is better than what any of us possess alone.

The key word in our lesson on grafting is uniting. Suffering was never meant to be endured in isolation. We must connect with Christ and each other in times of trials and pain. This is the only way our sufferings are transformed into growth and produce good fruit. Apart from the true vine, our tender branches wither and die.

There is no formula for how we are grafted into the true vine, but we begin by uniting ourselves to Christ and the church in our baptism, in sharing the Eucharist, this is the body of Christ which was broken for you, this is the blood of Christ which was shed. And we follow his command to we love one another. Turning our focus to Christ each day through prayer and scripture trains our spirits to look for God's movement in our lives. All of these things form us in

the ways of Jesus, but it's the work of the Holy Spirit to keep the gospel fresh, to continue reminding us that it is only in Him that we live, move, and have our being.

We are part of God's divine story. It's a story that seems too good to be true: being so utterly loved by God that he gave his son to redeem us, brought us into right relationship with Him and each other, and continues to setting us to rights, that we may be who we truly are as individuals and the worldwide body of Christ. May God, in His mercy, pour out his grace on us to keep these truths forever fresh.