

“Again & Again: God Reforms Us”

John 12:20-33

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Beth and I went to MSU’s Broad Art Museum this week for the first time in over a year and I was reminded how often art helps me build a bridge between scripture and my life, the artist’s images and imagination to create deeper meaning and connections. I went in with the theme of reformation in mind, the idea that God is always re-forming or transforming us, our community, and the world, and I started interpreting ideas of reformation into each of the exhibits. In particular, the work of Jenny Kendler stayed with me.

Jenny Kendler is an artist and climate justice activist. Her work attempts to bring the viewers awareness into how humanity interacts with or re-forms nature. I especially loved this piece called Whale Bells. Each of these handblown glass bells makes a sound inspired by the songs of humpback whales. The glass bells are suspended by macrame rope and the clapper in each bell - the part of the bell that makes the sound - is actually a fossilized ear bone from another species of whale, the rorqual whale, a species that is related to the humpback whale but is now extinct. Kendler is playing with the idea that these long-extinct whales have a message that today’s whales can still hear.

I loved this installation because it reminded me that even after something dies, it can be transformed and interact or impact the life that comes after it. The humpback whales exist in part because of the whale species that came before them, and through the artists’ lens, we as viewers are able to better understand that connection and left to wonder, what has died and is still leaving messages for us to hear? What has been re-formed and found its way back to life in a new way or with new purpose?

Much of our faith points toward the belief that there is life after death. We see this in nature through the cycles of the seasons, of green stalks breaking out of the frozen ground, another spring persisting no matter how long and hard winter was. We see this in stories of people who have endured unimaginable loss not only surviving but finding their way back to love, choosing life again and again in the midst of the heaviness of grief. We see this in communities ancient and modern, communities that are uprooted from their home, their way of gathering, who become lost in a wilderness they had not anticipated, but nevertheless find their way back to each other, who make a home in the wilderness, who realize that community is not one building or one way of being, but is a spirit that endures in all manner of circumstances and hardships.

We tell these stories again and again because it is one of the hardest parts of being human. We need reminders. We need to know we are not alone when choosing life feels difficult. We need to know that God is at work in us - reforming our spirits and our purpose in the midst of death and loss and grief, guiding us toward a life that is oriented toward mercy and hope and peace.

The gospel story from John that we heard is another telling of this ancient theme, of humans trying to understand what to do in the face of death and grappling with where they will go next. This story is a bit out of order. Next week is Palm Sunday when we will hear the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, a ragged parade that signaled he was in town to stand up to authority, to speak justice in the face of corruption and evil. That story kicks off what we know as holy week, Jesus' last days of ministry, the betrayal as he is arrested and publicly beaten, his death and his resurrection, our Easter celebration of death not having the last word.

During the events of holy week is when this story takes place. The threat of death and loss was in the air as the disciples sought out Jesus for comfort and reassurance. Instead of offering them empty platitudes, Jesus acknowledges that death is to come, his death is to come. He offers his worried disciples the image of a grain of wheat, who in dying, being plucked or falling to the earth, becomes something new. The single grain of wheat can be re-formed into flour, baked into bread, and become a tiny part of something that goes on to feed someone. In death its purpose is re-formed, it's meaning is transformed, and it continues to provide life for others.

This idea of God working to re-form us in death, or re-form our understanding of life after death, does not take away the immediacy of the sting of death when we lose someone or something we love dearly. Our work is still that of wading through the grief knowing that the only way out is through. But rather, as we move through those stages of grief this reminds us that death does not mean the end. Someone we love who has died can continue to shape our lives and our futures by the last effects of the love they gave. A place we have been separate from can continue to teach us of the importance of community and finding ways to gather. The fossilized ear bones of a whale can be used to bring awareness to the beauty of the songs of humpback whales today. Who we are today is because of what came before us, who came before us, and self-evolution is tied to them.

There are big deaths, the loss of people we love, the loss of life as we know it, but there are little deaths that also reform us or help us trace back our identity. Recently Beth and I have been participating in the sacred COVID era activity of cleaning out our house. We've lived together for 10 years and have lived in our current house for almost 5, but it feels like we have accumulated a lifetime of things. The hardest things to say goodbye to are hobbies or hopes that have died over time - projects we will never get to, crafts that have not held our interest the way

other things have. I used to make books, journals of all sizes and varieties, and occasionally I would repair old books. I haven't done this in over a decade but I have carried the supplies with me, holding on to that part of my identity, even as I gravitated toward other passions and learned different skills that took up my time. Saying goodbye to those supplies last month was admitting that chapter in my life was over, which felt a little sad.

Sadness gave way to gratitude as I translated the loss as a reformation of my identity. Because of my experience and practice making books, I learned important things about myself: my learning style, my love of following steps and infusing them with creativity, an appreciation for crafts that are passed down through generations and produce something both beautiful and useful. These same themes are still a part of me, most recently reformed into my quilting, which has much of the same process as book making, just with a different medium and different tools. Honoring the way my passions and interests continue to shift and form allows me to say yes to new ventures, giving away one thing created more space on the shelf for different tools to appear.

Part of our Lenten journey is to understand that we live with death. We can't deny it. We can't reject it. It just is. It's the most painful part of this life, but we know that even as we experience death, unexpected and anticipated, tragically young or at the end of a long life well lived, God is still at work. God is reforming us through those experiences back toward life, toward love, toward hope. God is braiding us together with those who have come before us, helping us to find meaning in our lives through their legacies. Again and Again, we are reformed. May it be so. Amen.