

Rootedness and Belonging

Easter tide; Mothers' Day

Philippians 3:8

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

For Mother's Day and for our reflection on the family, I have a dilemma for you. Perhaps a better word would be paradox, and that is that it is in the family that we gain our rootedness which has the positive value of giving us a sense of identity as to who we are and who we are being called to be. It is also in the family that we can be so deeply rooted that we fail to have an appreciation for an openness to the wonderful diversity of creation. That is something of a paradox, and what I want to say to you today is that the family is so terribly important for giving to us a shaping and a formation that will enable us to move through life effectively, but it is such a perilous task because if we don't do it with great care, we can be shut down rather than opened up.

A couple of weeks ago I was invited to Grand Haven High School for their Diversity Day. The Diversity Day was a morning in which they brought in someone from the outside, an actor, a psychologist-type, a very effective speaker who addressed half the student body while the other half went to their respective classes. And then they did a switcheroo, and I was one of a number of guests who were brought in to address or to be with the students in their respective classes while half of them were being addressed by the star of the morning. I, of course, represented the field of religion, and I was paired with Rabbi Alan Alpert, my good friend from Muskegon. Bob Kleinheksel was also one of those who engaged with the students. But, Alan Alpert and I, before we opened our mouths, were already a statement to the diversity that exists within the religious community and the fact that that diversity can be overcome with mutual respect and affection, as we were very good friends and we are able to share with the students about our own relationship and the relationship of our respective communities. As I began to address that situation, suddenly I recognized the fact that all of my nurture, all of my training, all of the influences of my home and my church, all of the efforts and the prayers of my parents and my pastors and my teachers were to the end that I might be narrowed down, not opened up. This simply struck me. Obviously it wasn't anything I didn't know all my life, but I never thought about it in this context. I realized before those students that a diversity day like that in old

Kalamazoo Central when I was a Maroon Giant would have threatened the pants off me, because I was traditioned, I was nurtured, I was shaped, I was formed, I had rigor mortis of the soul before I was graduated from high school, and it struck me so that all of that which was done for me was to give me tunnel vision, narrow me down, secure me in the truth, and, as I shared with the students, done by tender, loving, well-meaning parents and pastors and teachers with the best of intention and done so tenderly, but it is a fact that it was to close me down.

Now I am so far from that today that I can hardly believe that it's still going on, and so, I said to the students, "That doesn't go on anymore, does it?" They said it does, and of course I really knew that it still goes on, because isn't that what home and family are for? Isn't that the function of parents? And then, thinking about it, I recognized how perilous it is to do that job of nurturing and shaping and forming.

Now, the positive side of it is obvious. I was rooted, and rootedness is essential for a healthy human being. I knew who I was; I had a sense of identity, a strong sense of identity. I had a sense of God and family and faith and those fundamental values and issues of our human condition. But the peril is that nurture and formation end by creating walls around us, isolating us from the other, and insulating us from the rich diversity of the human experience.

I had set aside an article that I came across sometime ago for this particular Sunday prior to my Diversity Day experience. It was written by a fellow named Pico Iyer in *Civilization*, the magazine of the Library of Congress, and the title of the article is "Citizen Nowhere," an excerpt from a book recently published. This particular author, who is a journalist, was reflecting on the fact that there is a new human being emerging, a human being with a global soul. He represents that group, which certainly is a first-world, affluent phenomenon, nonetheless a growing phenomenon in our world today and a kind of experience that many of us can somewhat identify with, although his situation was certainly in the extreme. He grew up in India and he never knew his father's native tongue nor his mother's native tongue, they all shared British English, and he was born into a home of Hindu faith, raised in Christian schools, and identifies mostly now with Buddhist communities. He spoke about the nature of this phenomenon which is becoming more and more the case in our world where one may not dwell on the continent where one works, or, in his case, have no relatives on the continent where he more or less lives. He told about the thousands and thousands of miles, air miles, that he clocks and said these kind of people are the people that still engage with the rituals of death, perhaps scattering a father's ashes 6000 miles from where one lives, or get up in the morning in Santa Barbara and in the evening be in the broken heart of Manila Or start out in the Big Apple and end up in the dusty streets of Haiti. A world in which we are thrown around and thrown together, exposed to all kinds of experiences, one upon another in rapid fire, ending up with a porous personality that doesn't really know who it is, a porous personality that can become whatever the particular situation and location calls

for. People who grow up as he did in three different cultures and live somewhere in the cracks, people who are so informed about every facet of every issue and can see so many sides of every question that they have no basis for making a judgment or come to conviction or make any commitment. He talks about being unaffiliated. He says, "Oh, there's a blessing of being unaffiliated - one can continue to have new experiences that bring wonder and awe. But, unaffiliation can also cause lack of responsibility and accountability."

And then he spoke about the threat of rootlessness and the fact that the human soul needs rooting, and that in this day, in this phenomenon which is becoming increasingly common, the threat is for a kind of amorphous being to evolve that has no sense of identity when no one else is around, who doesn't know really who one is or what the human condition is all about. So, if it is possible to be so deeply rooted that one is isolated from the diversity of creation, it is also possible to be so exposed to that diversity that one has no sense of who one is and what one is called to be.

Interesting juxtaposition and on this day of the family, this Mother's Day, I thought it might be good for us to recognize the paradox of that need for nurture and shaping and formation and that need to so nurture and form that we will be able to transcend all of those givens of our lives, those givens over which we have nothing to say, the color of our skin, our race, our ethnic grouping, our national alignment, our religious tradition, our creedal grouping, our sexual orientation, those things that are simply given to us. Nurture that is positive must root in order to give a sense of identity, and nurture so that there is the ability to transcend all of those natural givens in order that we might find a community in which the other is no longer other, but is embraced in a larger grace and love and community.

At the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus, there was a breakfast by the Sea of Tiberius, with those going back to Galilee. Peter had said, "I'm going fishing." They said, "We'll go with you." And, however they took up their lives, it was in the picking up of that life in Galilee that they experienced again the presence of the Lord, but they had come to the bonding of community.

The classic example has to be Paul, who has gotten a lot of bad press and probably deserves most of it, but that amazing thing about Paul is the degree to which he was able to transcend the traditioning, the formation of his life. He talks about it in that third chapter of Philippians - circumcised the eighth day, born of the people of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews. As to the law, a Pharisee. As to zeal, persecuting the church. As far as the righteousness of the Law was concerned, blameless. All of that and what did he do for it? And this is the danger of effective nurture. It made him a violent person, because he was on the road to Damascus, issuing warrants of arrest to those who were of another Jewish sect, the followers of the Way. If nurture is not carefully given, it will imbue in one the idea that one has the truth and, whether taught explicitly or not,

will imply that is the only truth. It will isolate one from the larger human community and, where things don't go well, it can issue in a violent personality.

We see it in our world today which, as Piko Iyer has said, is becoming a global village. A global village sounds secure, but it's a global city and it's threatening, and the rising of nationalisms around the globe are full of peril and danger, and in the religious sphere the upsurge of fundamentalists is a consequence of fear and the insecurity of those who feel threatened in their little respective selves. If we are not careful in the nurturing of children and adults, we'll be creating persons who are threatened by the other and have a potential for violence.

But Paul had an experience and it was an experience of Jesus Christ, and talk about transcending, he takes all of that bundle of credentials and says, "I consider it refuse." Another translation says rubbish. That's a little radical, but then Paul was never known for moderation. But he was so imbued with all of that tradition of his Jewish Pharisaical face, that for him to be able to tie it all in a bundle and let it go was nothing less than a miracle of grace. He saw something more. He was the one with some validity; he is credited as being the founder of Christianity. Not Jesus, but Paul, because Paul saw in the Jew Jesus, in the God of Jesus, the God of Israel who was a God of inclusivity - he saw the possibility of a grace of God that embraced the whole world. Paul was the universalizer, taking his cue from Jesus, and he was able to let go. That's a miracle. Do you know how tough that is? He let it all go and created a whole new community, and I want to say that the only reason for the church is to be a community which can give a sense of belonging and be a center for generating inspiration, emerging in conviction and commitment for the transformation of the world through the tearing down of all barriers that separate humankind, to tear down those barriers that separate us from the other who become so threatening because of color of skin, because of ethnic curiosity, because of sexual orientation. Suddenly we de-humanize, we de-nature, we demean and destroy.

This community is a community of inclusion intentionally, respecting no boundaries or barriers that would divide. It's not easy. It is very easy to nurture, deeply rooting. Giving a narrow sense and a tunnel vision builds strong institutions, builds strong congregations. It's quite a risky thing to tell you that we don't possess all the truth. It's quite a risky thing to tell you that there are other places where the grace is just as free, quite a risky business to tell you that you don't have to be here any more than you have to be here in order to be fueled up to get out there and do the job you are called to do.

I'm proud of this place; I'm proud that last night at "A Night of 100 Stars," honoring volunteers in this area, 20% or 25% of the volunteers in this Tri-Cities area came from this community. (Three of our people were very instrumental in putting on that event - Trudy Schultz, Kathy Bolthouse, and Gloria Klinger; there may have been some others involved.) I'm not surprised at all. Peter has been leading the charge into this community for a number of years now because the

purpose of this place is not an end in itself; it's not that this place may exist. It is that this place may exist in order to send people out of here with a sense of breadth and grace and reconciling love that will tear down every barrier and bind together all the people of God, all of the children of God. It's a tricky business, but what a wonderful, freeing thing it is when the fear drops away. What a wonderful thing it is to be able to embrace the other as a brother or a sister, and what a beautiful community this is. We had an Elders' Meeting again this week and I said to the people who came, "I love this community. I'm so proud of it. I believe in it because of the kind of people who are continuing to come to it, all sorts and conditions of humankind. Wonderful."

Now, how do you nurture so that you create enough rootedness through a sense of belonging in community that you can go forth, having transcended all peculiarities? That is the task and that is divine.