“Spiritual Confidence”

A sermon by the Rev. Rachel Wildman

Sunday, March 18th, 2019 at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Bedford, MA

2nd Sunday in Lent scripture references: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 and Luke 13:31-35

I began taking piano lessons in 3rd grade. I had never done much but fool around on the piano now and again…I hadn’t shown any aptidue or strong desire. As such, it wasn’t my parents who suggested it. It was me. I begged them for lessons, and they happily set them up. Although I didn’t have any words for it at the time, from that beginning, my time at the piano was my time alone with God. I hated for my family to overhear my practicing. Recitals were torture…not because I was nervous of making a mistake (which I was), but because I was embarrased to share this very private spiritual experience with others. My embarrasment peaked in high school, and I quit.

It took a decade for me to return to it…not so surprisingly, just a year after I returned to church after many years away. But, even as an adult, my yearning to play, and the spiritual release that I felt when I did, were things I wanted to experience privately….until just a few years ago, when my comfort and confidence in welcoming others into my spiritual life grew. I have come to honor it as a transformational prayer practice for me. As such, within it, I have begun to claim God’s full liberating love for me, and others…And I am now sharing it with others at recitals and practicing where everyone can hear me…

And do you know what?

People respond!...Despite the many obvious mistakes I make, and the nerves which make me lose my place at least once in every recital…When I take the time before I start to silently offer my playing to God, people…are…moved.

They grab me after, and often without words to articulate it, want in on the rich, emotional, spiritual conversation.

And guess what…I have been moved, too! As I have invited others into the conversation, my piano prayer has become even more freeing for *me* (except when it is completely frustrating…as every prayer practice can be…but that is for a different sermon)….by talking about it with those at recitals and beyond as a form of prayer, of the deep connection to God which has come from it and the love I experience within it, that love becomes ever more accessible to me, just as I am observing it does for some others.

So, how does this relate to our readings from today? Well, woven into both our Genesis and Gospel readings is that God’s love is most liberating when we have the spiritual confidence to share our experiences of it with others.

Abram has this powerful conversation with God that no one else hears…and like many experiences of prayer, the end result is vague—a gorgeous, brilliant bunch of stars. Yet he has the confidence to talk about it with others and to allow it to inform his actions, and he is ultimately gifted into the liberating love of children and grandchildren and great grandchildren, and many, many more generations of Abrahams.

And in our Gospel passage, Jesus ends by naming this same reality: when we have the spiritual confidence to talk about and share our faith with others…THEN we will see Jesus—Then we will witness the full liberation he promises. Jesus says, “You will not see me until the time comes when you *say*, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

The way this line is situated in the passage, it seems part of the dark confrontation Jesus and the pharisees are having. It may be that, but my own experience of the life of faith is that it is also just plain true. There is a new freedom to experience God’s loving movement in our lives when we have the confidence to *say* things about our faith to other people.

And yes…many of you probably know where I am going with all this…hmmm….where have we heard the phrase “spiritual confidence” recently? Our new strategic priorities! Yes!

Our Strategic Priority about nurturing our curiosity and cultivating our spiritual confidence and boldness is about this truth…it is this community articulating it’s awareness that in order to fully experience the liberation of radical love which Jesus holds out to us, we need to be able to talk about God’s movement in our lives with each other, and eventually also with others…we have to be bold enough to claim it, and invite others into the sacred conversations we are having with God.

I don’t know how many of you were here last week for Vestry Sunday and heard Sanjeev’s sermon. If you weren’t here, there is a link to it on our website, and I urge you to watch it. Sanjeev, with such spiritual confidence, took a risk—sharing the story of his faith journey, including his doubts and unanswered questions, with all of us. And I think all of us who heard can attest to its power. It caused a mighty emotional and spiritual reaction in many of us—a rich and abundant love for Sanjeev and for God that, itself, was a moment of liberation.

As Sanjeev so beautifully revealed, spiritual confidence is not about certainty. It is not about being certain about our beliefs, about who we are, even about what the most pressing needs are that face us. Just as it is not about me playing perfectly in a recital. Instead, spiritual confidence and the liberation of love that it promises, are about being willing to invite others into our spiritual lives. Into our conversations with the divine…our questions and hang ups…our longings…our prayers.

What do you need from this community in order to nurture your questions about God? To help develop your confidence to share with others why you are here, in this pew, when you could be doing so many other things? Some of you may have ideas that spring right to mind…Share those with me, and Chris, and your Vestry…others of you may not even know what you need, only that you do need something. For you, try something out and see how it feels…take a risk. Maybe our next Soup and Study night on Tuesday…or attending a meeting of a ministry group that you have a bit of an affinity towards…or making the time one weekday to attend morning prayer. Even if it ends up not feeling right, it may give you important information about what it is you really need. That mass of gorgeous, brilliant stars, may just come into more and more focus.

May God’s own curiosity and confidence abound, in us and by us, this day and ever more. AMEN.