

*WE ARE THE CHURCH,
BUT WHO ARE WE?*

Psalm 8
February 5, 2017

I've become enthralled by a song as of late. It's not a new song. It's one I've been familiar with for some time, one I've always liked hearing on the radio. It's only recently that I've actually listened to the song and become enthralled by it. The song is "Stolen Car" by British singer/songwriter, Beth Orton.

The song includes these lyrics:
When every line speaks the language of love
It never held the meaning I was thinking of
And I lost the line between right or wrong
I just want to find the place where I belong

Why should you know better by now
When you're old enough not to?
I wish I knew better by now
When I'm old enough not to.

We have a language of love, ideas about love, what we think love is or should be. But how do we actually experience love? Or its loss? Does how we actually experience love in our lives, in our hearts, conform to our language, to our ideas, to what we think love is or should be?

Life is sometimes confusing. We lose our certainties. The line between right or wrong becomes blurry. It shifts depending on circumstances. We lose sight of it. In our highly complex social, political and economic relationships, in our most intimate human relationships, in love and its loss, it's not always clear what's right or wrong.

Sometimes you just want to find the place where you belong. That's all you want, to find the place where you belong. Because you're not in the place where you belong. Or maybe you are but just don't know it, so you're looking for it. Whatever the case, "I just want to find the place where I belong" is a powerful feeling, one associated with a deep need.

"I wish I knew better by now, when I'm old enough not to." That's the line that got me to listen more closely to this song. "I wish I knew better by now, when I'm old enough not to." What exactly does she mean? I can interpret that line in more than one way, but however I interpret it, there's always a feeling of regret. "I wish I knew better by now, when I'm old enough not to."

I'm enthralled by this song. With the instrumental arrangement and the atmosphere it produces. With the lyrics and how Beth Orton sings them; I love her voice. With the questions it raises that I can ponder in my life.

Questions about language and love—my own thoughts and ideas about love, and how I actually experience love in my life, in my heart.

Questions about right or wrong—those times when it's not easy for me to discern right or wrong, those times when there are positive and negative consequences to whatever I do.

Questions of belonging. Where do I belong? In what place do I belong? With whom do I belong? Do I feel that I'm in the place where I belong?

Finally, questions about knowing better by now, when I'm old enough not to. And questions of regret.

We have two things coming up in the life of our church. One is the season of Lent, which begins a month from today. The other is our church visioning and discernment process.

The season of Lent is traditionally a time when we focus on a spirituality of self-reflection and discernment. Our role model is Jesus, who entered the desert for a sustained period of self-reflection and discernment. In the desert, Jesus had nothing to distract him from his every thought and feeling, from every voice in his head, from every sensation in his body. He had nowhere to run and hide from himself, especially those parts of himself he didn't want to face. The desert forced him to face himself. To know himself.

We typically don't do something that intense during Lent, but hopefully each one of us will take some time to reflect on our lives, our relationships, our faith, our discipleship. It's good for us to face ourselves. To know ourselves. To confess who we are to ourselves, as well as to God.

Some may object that focusing on ourselves is too self-centered, that we should focus on other people's needs instead. I understand that objection. Focusing on ourselves can become too self-centered. But it's possible to focus on our lives in ways that aren't too self-centered. Indeed, when done right, focusing on our lives can help us become less self-centered. After facing ourselves for some time, we may say to ourselves, I didn't realize how self-centered I've become, without even knowing it.

And let's not forget that when we focus on other people's needs, we can do so for reasons that are very self-centered. So focusing on our lives doesn't have to be self-centered. When done right, it helps us become less self-centered. It helps us become more responsive to other people's needs for reasons that aren't about me. It helps us know ourselves.

During Lent, I'm going to invite you to participate with me in a series of personal reflections. They're reflections about love, right and wrong, belonging, wishing we knew better when we're old enough not to, and perhaps, regret. They're reflections on God—our experience of God, our relationship with God. Reflections on life—our experience of life, our relationship with life.

Chuck Jackson shared these reflections with some of us several months before he died, and I always thought they'd make a good Lenten series. The Jesuit priest, Anthony de Mello, developed these reflections before he died.

The reflections consist of sixteen testimonials. We'll focus on four testimonials a week, for four weeks. The testimonials are simple, but the more you reflect on your life, the deeper you can take them. Here are the testimonials.

March 5

1. These things I have loved in life: things I have tasted, looked at, smelled, touched.
2. These experiences I have cherished:
3. These ideas have brought me liberation:
4. These beliefs I have outgrown:

March 12

5. These convictions I have lived by:
6. These are the things I have lived for:
7. These insights I have gained in the school of life: insights into God, the world, human nature, Jesus Christ, love, religion, prayer.
8. These risks I took, these dangers I have courted:

March 19

9. These sufferings have seasoned me:
10. These lessons life has taught me:
11. These influences have shaped my life: persons, occupations, books, events.
12. These scripture texts have lit my path:

March 26

13. These things I regret about my life:
14. These are my life's achievements:
15. These people are enshrined within my heart:
16. These are my unfulfilled desires:

On the fifth week, the last week, we'll do something a bit different: choose something that reflects your life—a poem, a prayer, a sketch, a photograph, a picture from a magazine, a work of art, lyrics from a song—anything that you judge to be a fitting conclusion to your testament, and share it with the group.

If we face our own lives through the lens of these testimonials, it's possible that we'll come to know ourselves in some deeper ways, perhaps some new ways. And if we gather to share with one another some of what our reflections reveal to us, it's possible that we'll get to know one another in some deeper ways, perhaps some new ways. That's the hope anyway.

Reflecting on our lives and sharing with one another during Lent may also help us in our upcoming discernment and visioning process. We sometimes talk about “the church” as if “the church” were an abstraction or an object. “We have to conduct a study of the church,” we sometimes say. Or we talk about “the church” as if it were just an institution with a bunch of programs, a bunch of different things we do. “What are we going to do next?” we often ask ourselves.

But we don't often ask ourselves the question, “who are we?” Who am I, really? And who is the person sitting over there, really? *We* are the church, but who are *we*?

We spend a lot of time in this church talking about politics, books, movies and sports. We spend a lot of time talking about issues—racism, climate change, immigration, refugees. And that's great, I'm glad. But aside from our Discipleship Group, we don't spend much time getting to know ourselves and one another on a more personal level, at a “deeper” level.

Last year during Lent, Jo, Cecile and I led a series of reflections based on a work by the poet, Christian Wiman. The reflections encouraged those of us who participated to reflect on how we experience life, how we experience love, how we experience God and Christ, how we experience suffering, and how we feel about dying and death. When the series was over, many of you who participated said you found it very meaningful and helpful. You wanted to do more of that kind of personal reflection and sharing. It helped you get to know yourself and “the

church” in some new and deeper ways.

So please consider participating this year during Lent. I have copies of Anthony de Mello’s reflections available today, and will have them available every week from now throughout Lent. Please take one today and begin to reflect on the testimonials, so you can come prepared to help us get to know “the church” in some new and deeper ways.