

Detail:

3-29-20 Sermon "The Free(ing) Way"

I don't know what the popular toys are today - only that they're much different than the toys I had as a kid. First off, if there's a computer or some kind of chip in it, we didn't have it. Computer games, battery powered cars, even Big Wheels, all came after my childhood had ended.

Even Legos, the building block toy that is so popular now that they have their own chain of stores, weren't around, or at least not prevalent when I was a kid. The Lego company was founded in 1932, but the interlocking Lego block as we now know it only came around in 1958, a year before I was born, and we never had Legos when I was growing up.

We had toy cars, Hot Wheels and Matchbox, we built model cars and planes, we had toy soldiers and dolls like GI Joe and Barbie, and growing up in the 1960s, during the Apollo era, we had space related toys like the Major Matt Mason action figures.

And then there were the old standbys of balls and bats, kickballs, basketballs, lawn darts (Jarts), bicycles and tricycles, and the like. And of course, there were blocks: wooden blocks, plastic blocks, cardboard blocks. Blocks were a basic and on any rainy, cold, or snowy day, if all else failed, a kid with blocks and imagination could build rocket ships, castles, forts, and even houses.

When I was in real estate I often worked with buyers who wanted to build a new house instead of buying an existing home.

So we would go to a new home development and look at floor plans with a builder rep. And in developing a community, builders would make slight changes to otherwise identical floor plans in order to avoid the appearance of what's called a "cookie cutter" neighborhood, where all the houses looked alike. So, for example, they would reverse a plan and put the garage on the right in some houses and on the left in others, or make other cosmetic changes to the exteriors to hide the fact there were only a small number of plans available. They tried to avoid the look of the popular tract housing that was built in many communities following the Second World War, where all the houses up and down every street basically looked the same, had the same floor plan, where literally, if you'd seen one you'd seen them all.

There's a saying out there that, "a person's home is their castle." And we know what castles look like, right, with their high walls, great spires, and huge halls. Castles were fortresses in most cases, designed to be defensible against attack. And so if we were to try to build a classic castle out of, say, blocks, it might look something like this, at least on the outside.

And I would suggest that we not only build castles like fortresses but often times we also build our faith and belief system this way too. We build high walls, tall spires, and sometimes even surround the castles of our faith with outer walls or moats to fend off attack. Like the Temple described in our Gospel reading today, our "faith castles" are often built with high walls and restricted areas designed to keep certain people - or ideas - out. And within these personal temples, we often erect walls in order to guard against those who think or worship differently than we do, even within our own faith tradition and

denominations. But whether we've built our temples at the denominational, congregational, or the individual or personal level, when we're in them we tend to hunker down in our our fortress faith and then just defy someone to come along and challenge us or our beliefs.

I discerned a call into ministry and began seminary at age 45. After having served in many and various leadership positions in the church as a layperson for most of my life, and having completed multiple bible studies including three years of Disciple Bible Study before beginning that journey, I was pretty sure that my faith and theology were built on solid ground. I was pretty sure of what I believed, how it all fit together or stacked up in a very systematic way - what would be called a systematic theology. I thought I was on pretty firm ground, that my house was built on stone. I had my theological world, my "Mighty Fortress" if you will, built pretty securely. Or so I thought.

In my first semester in seminary I took only one course: Introduction to the Hebrew Bible. It had been 23 years since I was last in school so I thought I would dip my toe in the water to see how it felt. It was okay.

Other than coming out of that class with this strange image of Eddie Murphy's character Donkey from the movie Shrek as the talking donkey in the Book of Numbers, I think my castle was still standing, perhaps minus a couple of blocks here and there.

Next semester I began full time study. Monday nights was Church History with Professor Diane Lobody. Our Confirmation class met Dr.

Lobody last fall when she came and talked to us about the early church.

One of our first assignments was to write an 8-10 page paper, with very specific points to be covered, about the works of the early church father Tertullian. It was the first paper I had written since I finished my Bachelor's Degree – so to say that I was a bit “rusty” would diminish the many positive qualities of rust. Before returning our papers she lovingly referred to us as a bunch of “knuckleheads,” and said that some of the papers were very good and others were not. After some discussion came the message of grace. Those, she said, whose grade was lower than a B- would be allowed to rewrite and resubmit the paper.

I know, rewriting an 8-10 page paper seems less like grace and more like grinding salt in the wound, but that was the message. And besides, in graduate school, any grade lower than a B was basically considered failing anyway. I was unsure as to whether my paper was good enough to have earned at least a B-. All kinds of questions pin-balled through my head.

At the end of class she distributed the papers, face down, as we prepared to leave. She handed me my paper and I stuffed it into my backpack without looking at it - I didn't want any kind of reaction to register on my face in front of my classmates. I got to my car, slid the paper out of the bag, and turned on the light so I could see. There was nothing on the front cover. As I flipped through the paper I could see notes, *lots* of handwritten notes. As I reached the last page I saw the grade, written in red ink and circled: “F.”

“F.” I swallowed hard and just sat there, looking at the paper, feeling my face turning as red as the ink. As I read the notes, it was clear I was not in Kansas anymore, Toto, and I could see more of the blocks starting to fall off the walls of my fortress.

The notes in the paper indicated not only grammatical errors and a writing style that she described as “awkward,” but also that the content of the paper did not fulfill the specific requirements for the assignment as outlined in the syllabus - that this was not graduate level work. I questioned right then whether seminary was the right path for me.

However, as disappointed as I was with the grade, I knew it was well deserved. Diane made very clear notes in the paper about where I had gone wrong and strongly recommended that I seek assistance on campus to work on my “rusty” writing skills.

I took Diane’s comments to heart and beginning the next day, spent the next two semesters working on improving my writing skills. And I did rewrite that paper on Tertullian, and received a B+, the highest grade allowed on the resubmitted work. On this second paper were words of encouragement and recognition for the vast improvement from my feeble first attempt. That well-deserved “F” was a gift that set the future of my seminary career on the right path.

Then came my Introduction to New Testament class, and you can only imagine what happens there.

“What do you mean we don’t KNOW who actually wrote the gospels?”

“What do you mean Paul didn’t write all of ‘Paul’s’ letters?”

That sounds like a “who’s buried in Grant’s tomb joke doesn’t it?” Needless to say, my might fortress was crumbling before my eyes and it wasn’t long until there was very little of it left standing.

And nearly every seminary student goes through a period where you’re literally wondering “what in the world is going on here?” “How will I ever get my faith back?” And it’s only when you’ve hit that theological rock bottom that the rebuilding process begins. It’s literally a kind of dying and then being reborn. You slowly begin to move on from the faith of your childhood that you brought to seminary toward an adult faith, a reasoned faith, a faith that has been dissected and challenged in ways that no Sunday School class or bible study could ever do. You ponder these things 24/7, doing the hard work of study, prayer, and rebuilding, because when you get into the church the people in the pews have an expectation that you, as their pastor, will have your...”blocks”...together.

In our film, “The Way,” Tom, the father, sees his castle, his fortress crumble as first his wife dies, then his son leaves and then also dies, leaving Tom’s life a pile of stones scattered on the ground. Everything that was subsequently of importance to him was lost or scattered. And the film depicts how Tom, over time and with people who would have been excluded in his earlier life, help him put his life back together, even as they are putting their own life together as well.

In faith, and in life, it's much easier to build with Lego blocks – all the pieces snap together nicely, and when you buy the kit and follow the very detailed instructions, there are no extra parts and the end product looks exactly like the picture on the box. When the building blocks of our faith, or our fortress, are knocked down, however, when they're scattered all around us, we feel vulnerable, at our weakest. And some people can't handle that - even some pastors or would-be pastors can't handle that.

So instead of going to a seminary where they learn **how** to think, they go somewhere where they're told **what** to think, where they're given a theological Lego set, if you will, and told exactly how their blocks are supposed to fit together - regardless of their own faith background and life experiences, regardless of the contradictions or conflicts easily found in scripture or the challenges to both science and reason that the Bible often presents. And I don't believe that's theological education, I think that's indoctrination. And I don't believe it brings us freedom, I believe it makes us captives.

Having your blocks knocked down is scary. Believe me, I get it - been there, done that. And in that time of doubt, in that time of weakness and vulnerability, we can't go it alone, we need community to lift us up, to help us find our blocks, so we can begin to rebuild. In the film, Tom tried to do this work by himself - depicted by his walking alone, ahead of or behind the others - but he always failed. As we engage in that process some things will attach to our intellect, some to our soul, and still others to our heart? And what we rebuild will likely look only somewhat similar to what was knocked down. New things, new information and ideas, new beliefs, new ways of seeing and thinking, new values, new people, will become part of this new faith structure that God is building in us.

There is a certain safety, a certain level of security, to be found in a Lego faith, even in a Lego church. But that's not what people *need* in this world today, even if it's what some *want*. Imagine yourself sitting in your usual spot in the sanctuary. And understand that, as you imagine yourself turning and looking at the other people seated around the sanctuary - all a safe distance from one another - there's not a single person here whose faith, whose beliefs are the same as yours.

There's not a single person in this church or in this world who brings the same unique perspective, experiences, or understandings into *their* faith that you bring to yours.

Their faith is not your faith; your faith is not their faith. They have much in common, we have common foundations, but they're not same, they'll never be the same, and that *has* to be okay with you or you will forever be in a state of conflict, confusion, and doubt.

Now, some have suggested to me over the years that as a pastor, it's my responsibility to teach and preach the "right way" to believe, but I reject that premise. I believe my role as a pastor isn't to teach you *what* to think, but rather *how* to think about issues of faith through the lens of *your* life and experience. I'll give you some foundations, some insights about how to approach those foundations, but what you build on them is up to you. You'll notice that none of the sermons in this series about "The Way of Jesus" have been titled "My Way," "The Right Way," or "The Only Way." I will never use the pulpit as a tool of indoctrination because I take the role of teaching and preaching too seriously, and I have too much respect for *you* to use it in that way.

Instead, I will work through scripture with you, trying to help you to understand context and meanings, how one passage compares to another, how different people who are much smarter and more experienced than I have thought about these ideas, and then let you

use those building blocks to build a faith that you can live in and trust and that can have new life in you.

When Jesus said the walls of the Temple would be knocked down, he meant more than just a building in Jerusalem, and was talking about more than his own death and resurrection. The faith temples we build as children in Sunday school, at some point, have to be knocked down and rebuilt with a faith we've developed on our own. As the late scholar Marcus Borg said, "it's okay to have a fifth grade faith...if you're in fifth grade." We do that building, as John Wesley put it, using Scripture, Tradition, Experience and Reason. Jesus frees us from captivity, not only to sin and death, but also from captivity to a faith and belief system that holds us captive as the Pharisees were theological captives. Paul talked a little about what that was like in Philippians passage today. And in the Gospels, every time Jesus told his disciples or the Pharisees, "you have heard it said...but I tell you this..." Jesus was knocking some of the blocks off of their theological castles.

You know, I didn't want an "F" on that first paper but I needed it. It was a terribly uncomfortable and even painful experience, but that early "F" in seminary was the single most important grade I have ever received in 21 years of schooling. That "F" became the foundation upon which I began my rebuilding. There are things, I would guess, that are like that for you as well. We share a common foundation in God our Creator, Jesus Christ our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit our Sustainer. Scripture and tradition form the building blocks, but it is our own personal experience in life, mixed with the God-given ability to use reason, that is the mortar that holds our blocks together. There's

no mortar needed - no experience or reason required - with a Lego faith built from a kit.

So in this time in which we are all confined in our own castles, as it were, I invite you to consider how *your* faith is built, what are the building blocks in *your* faith; what Scriptures and stories help shape *your* faith; what faith traditions have meaning for *you*; what life experiences of do *you* bring into the process; and what does living out that faith look like for *you* in the kin-dom of God. Our life and our faith grow and develop *in and by* community. This is a community that will nurture and support your explorations, that will challenge your preconceptions and that will help you pick up your blocks when you find them scattered all around you. And I know that there will be times when I will knock some of the blocks off your castles. That's part of my job.

But know that I will also help you rebuild.

So may God give the "F" that *you* need.

And may that "F" be *foundational* for you.

May it be *formational* for you.

And may it be *freeing* for you.

Being a *follower* of Jesus means you *will* run into some walls; some that will require you to turn back, others to go around, others to climb over. Some though, you'll just have to knock down if you're to continue on the way of Jesus.

There's an F word that will get you through those times as well; it's meaning is trust, that word is *Faith*.

Amen.