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The Rev. Kate Byrd

Chosen to Chose

Jer Clifton, a research psychologist from the University of Pennsylvania, has spent his entire career researching how our worldviews shape the way we live and move and have our being. One of the first case studies he witnessed was before he even began his career in the field. Here Jer heard the experiences of two very different individuals coming out of the same time during World War II, and how these experiences determined how they saw the world. The first was his grandfather in law, a combat dentist, working on the front lines of the war, to help piece back together the faces and mouths of soldiers injured in battle. Returning home after having experienced the atrocities of war and the crimes against humanity that took place in that time and space in our world's history, the dentist came to the conclusion that the world was a cruel and unusual place and life was, and I quote, "a poop sandwich." The second was from a tour guide named Sarah who Jer met on a choir trip during college to Lithuania. Sarah, Jer remembered, was one of those captivating people who everyone wanted to talk to, and when Jer finally got a chance to sit and chat with her, she shared with him the story of her childhood, as a young Jewish girl in Poland during World War II. Here she witnessed and became the victim of the nazi's who invaded her town. Captured at the beginning of the war, Sarah spent time in four different concentration camps. Auschwitz, being her final stop. One Christmas Eve, in 1944, her last in the camp coincidentally, Sarah became very ill and was sent to the infirmary, the worst part of the worst camp. Lying there on her cot, near death, another girl about her same age, reached across, stretched out her arm, so that she and her bunk mate could grasp one another's hand. In that moment, Sarah said to Jer, "I realized the world was so full of love and connection, [that] it was massive and impossible to stamp out. That the world was so wondrous... that I had no choice but to believe there was a God and to be grateful." While Sarah and Jer's grandfather in-law had ample evidence to support the belief that the world is an awful, terrible, unsafe, and cruel place, somehow both came out of that shared time and space with two completely separate world views. One solidified in their belief that the world is dangerous and life is a poop sandwich, and the other that the world is wondrous and life is a gift.

As human beings we use logic and reason to make deductions and assumptions about the world around us. Which would lead us to assume that those who live in poverty should see the world as scarce, and those who live in high crime zip codes should believe the world is more dangerous. Or on the opposite side of the spectrum, that those who have extreme wealth should see the world as abundant, and those who live relatively sheltered lives should see the world as safe and secure. But, research, as well as, (I would assume) our own life experiences, show us that this just isn't true. Even coming out of a worldwide pandemic we now have evidence from the research of those questioned before COVID (coincidentally) and post COVID (intentionally), that revealed no detectable change in individuals beliefs surrounding the world as a dangerous or a safe place even after living through the tragedy of a global pandemic. Allowing psychologists to affirm that our worldviews are not uniquely or solely shaped by our experiences. Meaning if we want to change the way we see the world, glass half empty or half full, we can. We don't have to wait for the world or our lives to get better to do so. We just have to believe, as God said last week in our Creation Story, that this world is good, more so that we as human beings are not only good but very, very good.

This week in our lectionary we move from our creation story to the story of Abram and Sarai. As we hear God say to Abram “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” Beginning the next chapter of a new era in the relational story of our God and God’s people. As we can note that, up until now it has not gone so well, this relationship that is. Beginning with Adam and Eve who were evicted from their perpetual holiday in paradise. To Cain who killed his brother Abel, as humanity and the plight of sin continued spiraling out of control. To, Noah who boarded his Arc, and God who sent a great flood, essentially starting creation over from scratch (or rather maybe just leftovers). To the Tower of Babel, as humanity once again tried to usurp God. All within the span of a meager 12 chapters, as we, God’s very very good creation, made a pretty big mess of this world and seriously missed the mark. And yet, God again and again and again chooses us, and more so desires to bless us, so that we may be the blessing we were created for.

Even in our passage from Matthew, Jesus reminds us of our chosenness as he calls Matthew from out behind the tax booth. As he invites sinners and tax collectors to join him at the table. As he heals the woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years. And, as he raises the synagogue leader’s daughter from the dead. Reminding us what kind of God our Creator is, as Jesus says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” Sinners, not simply meaning those who miss the mark, but even more so those who have been separated from God. Those who no longer see, know, experience the blessing God so desires for us to embody.

We are already chosen by God. and we know this, last week we heard it in our creation story, this week with Abram, coming out of our Easter season with Jesus, and even up until today with Matthew, the tax collectors and sinners, the hemorrhaging woman, the little girl. We have been chosen from the very beginning, we are chosen over and over again as our Scripture stories tell us, and we are chosen today and will continue to be chosen again and again. The question never was and never will be if God chooses us. The question is will we choose God? Will we choose to see the world as God sees it? With hope and optimism, with faith in humanity, with mercy and grace, with unwavering and unconditional love. What would it mean for us to look around, like God does throughout our Old Testament, or Jesus in our passage from Matthew, and see the blessings that are all around ready to be enacted and embraced. To see as Sarah did in the midst of her misery in a concentration camp infirmary bed that world is so full of love and connection that it is impossible to stamp it out, in a way that makes us grateful, grateful for this life for this world and for the blessing of being God’s chosen people, yesterday, today, and everyday. Amen.