

“Connectedness as a Watershed Discipleship”

A Sermon by Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 5/6/18

“Familiares”. I remember hearing this Spanish word for the first time as I met Pastor Marin in the town of Zaragoza, just outside of Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico. This was back in 1995, and I was still at the beginnings of learning Spanish. He put his two index fingers together, touching side by side, and said the word again: familiares. Which I learned meant “family” but in the related sense, like “relatives”. He was referring to his wife and me. La Hermana Paty, as we called his wife, shared the same maiden name as my own surname: Harrison—which was rare in Mexico, so rare that people with that same surname were automatically “related”, hence, we were “familiares”. This would not be the first time I’d hear the word, nor another word used very often “Paisano”. This word meant you were “neighbors” in the same area, or even region. Like you were from the same place geographically. People from Ciudad Juarez were “paisanos” with the people across the border in “El Paso”. This term had always eluded its full meaning for me until this very week. I now realize the word denotes a shared responsibility as well as culture; I had always just presumed geographic culture, not so much geographic space itself. That it is, until this past week.

Ruth and I, and our daughter Mumu, attended a “Watershed Discipleship” conference led by Ched Myers and Sara Thompson in nearby Charlottesville early last week. Here we were introduced to the idea of the real intricacies of “being Paisano”, that we are each connected to a bio-region by its natural watershed. We are “familiares” by virtue of our interrelatedness geographically, rather than just culturally. Our space and our interdependence on resources binds us together, and every single thing we do affects the space we share, everything from how we access and use the land to how we facilitate our wastes. It all affects the watershed itself, our source of water, our bio-heart, if you will. This is when it occurred to me that more than just culture, what really connects the populations of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico and El Paso, TX is its shared resources, its bio-region, its natural watershed. And its been like this for thousands of years. As we can see with a quick study of the Native Peoples of this continent, when colonization and wealth grabbing along with land-domination were not the guiding principles of the regional peoples, when there was a shared interest in preserving, protecting, honoring, and mutually respecting the resources of the shared space, the natural watershed—there was a greater harmony within the space and a natural balance within the eco-sphere. And harking back to Jesus’ own challenge for us to “seek first the kingdom of God and it’s justice” or better yet “balance”, we become an amazing conduit through which this truth can be carried.

In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul writes, “For creation became subjugated in frustration and seeks liberation”. It was but a couple weeks back that we saw Jesus’ analogy in John 15, which illustrates us abiding in Him as the vine, we the branches, and He abiding in the father. That this kind of interrelatedness goes to the core of Jesus’ message for the world. We are all connected. We are all “familiares”, we are all “paisanos”, and creation, which is all around us, encompassing us, desperately desires to be in sync once again... not subjugated, not ripped apart for personal short-term gain, but loved on and liberated to stand in harmony with us. In order to do this we must first embrace that we are co-partners in the same watershed, with the same agency to either love and respect our bio-region or to simply ignore it in hopes that this watershed will somehow protect itself. The inter-connectedness is hard to ignore. This morning the rain water has been working its way right through our campus here,

taking with it OUR chemicals, OUR waste, and diverting it into our creek down the gulley in the forest, which connects to another creek, and another until it pours into Blackwater Creek and then into the James River, which eventually carries it out to the Atlantic through the Chesapeake. This chain of connectedness cannot be forgotten. We are paisanos in our watershed. Are we willing, though, to be its disciples?

I was out at Bent Mountain, in Roanoke County, a couple days ago, while the mother and daughter duo, Red and Minor Terry were still in their separate tree stands, protesting the Pipeline slated to be built on their land, and I was immediately struck by the beauty of their sanctuary. Appalachia beauty at its finest, waterfalls cascading through lush mountain laurel backdrops. It was stunning. And all this would be ripped apart with the forced construction of a gas pipeline. They had been in their tree stands for a month when I got there. Minor told me, “my hope is that people will educate themselves about this place, about what we’re doing and why. This land is so important. This water is so important.” She was right. She was trying to protect not just her watershed, our watershed. As I got to Red’s separate camp, the mother and matriarch was suspended up in her tree, trying to stay encouraged. She said “thank you so much for coming”. I presented a card of support our kids here at church had prepared last week. I spoke with Mara, the camp coordinator, friend, and fellow protestor. She said that the day before had been her birthday, and she had her three spiritual friends dip her in the stream below the camp, and there she said she became (in her very own words), a “watershed disciple”. I was floored. I had only become familiar with the term a couple days earlier and here she was testifying to her own decision to become one with the land around her—to recognize her place in creation, in her bio-region, and to listen to its heartbeat. To let the watershed speak to her, to hear its groans and its pain. She would let the watershed be her teacher, and she its student. Mara’s epiphany and diligent wisdom inspired my own breakthrough mentally and spiritually this week.

Are we watershed disciples? Am I? Do we seek to bring balance and health to our bio-region? The invitation was certainly enshrined with the first Christians, wasn’t it? Simply reading from Acts 10, where Peter had come to the realization that God’s spirit was for everyone, not simply his culture and people only, that it was in fact open to all. This was confirmed when he wanted to bring that relationship in connection with the watershed itself in his question “do I hear any objections to baptizing these friends with water?” Many were baptized into the watershed that day. A connectedness, familiarity, was recognized in the symbol of baptism itself. The M’kvah, Hebrew for baptism, represents a cleansing, a newness, but the water itself a holiness found within creation—the Spirit of God herself. This is further exemplified by the Apostle John’s letter, where as we read in I John 5, he describes Jesus’ connection to us through both his birth and his baptism by water. Jesus connects to our watershed through both the people and the water itself, as well as his death, his own blood spilt into the soil. He is truly one with his bio-sphere. In as such, we are connected to our watershed whether we choose to be or not. Simply by geography, we are connected. By living here, we are connected. Now, whether we submit to learn from it, to honor it, to work with it in mutuality and respect, this becomes our greatest challenge. Are we willing to listen to its voice and heed its warnings? If so, then we are certainly conscious disciples working in its interests, dialoguing to learn more and to seek its justice too. We become equals on a journey of healthy sustainment, where equitability and mutual enjoyment for the benefit of all is paramount—selfishness becomes lost in our past. We think of each other now; the last becomes first, and first becomes last.

Where does it begin? It begins in the connection within. When we close our eyes and let all thoughts pass, we listen. In that listening we become alive, attuned to the heart's beating both within and without. We hear the creation calling us, beckoning our attention. We let our bare feet touch the silky grass. We hear the calling of our bird friends and the whispering of the leaves in the trees as they commune with the Spirit of the wind. Here we begin. Here we recognize our place with each other. We are one. In this contemplation we dig deep, we find where our roots connect, intertwined in our historical evolutions. We are one in the same. Our histories connected. One not existing without the other. We need each other. We need mutual discipleship. Then in this landscape we focus on our Paisano region, our own watershed. This is the eco-system to which we are rooted, both personally and as a local population. We are needed. We are necessary. We are to bring eco-justice back in place. As my Jewish friends say, this is our "Tikuun Olam", our bringing back together that which has been shattered. Righting the wrong.

Red and Minor Terry came down from their trees yesterday after a judge threatened to fine them into personal bankruptcy. But did they lose the fight for eco-justice? Really, it's more of a question, not about them, but more about us. Have we lost the fight, defending our own watershed from destruction? And this question can only be answered by us, individually. Have you given up? Have I thrown in the towel, or simply stopped caring? These are the questions of connectedness. Let us close our eyes, and discover our connectedness. Let us contemplate this synergy rooted in history, our timelines converging and emerging as members of Creation. Do we hear the voices? Do we recognize the struggle? And what part will we play in that struggle?

Peace be to you!