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Easter 6, Year A
Grace, River Forest
5/10/26

Right Where You Belong

Chicago is often called the wrongful conviction or coerced confession capital of the world. The history of corruption and misconduct in the justice system has led to being people locked behind bars for crimes they did not commit. People like the Englewood Four are plentiful. They were teenagers who happened to be black, arrested for brutal crimes in 1994. Despite inconsistencies and a lack of evidence, they were convicted and sentenced to prison based almost entirely on forced or coerced confessions. Finally, thanks to DNA testing and the work of organizations like The Innocence Project all charges were dismissed in 2012. In 2021, Illinois became the first state in the country to ban deceptive practices in police interrogations of minors.

They were re-membered by the work of someone else. Re-taught their loveliness from the outside in¹.

We know what it is like when someone speaks up for us. When someone acknowledges our presence. Honors our experiences. When- in word and action they say “I’ve got your back” and “you will not go through this alone.” Or when someone says “I believe you” and you don’t need to keep trying to justify your existence any more. When someone says through word or attention “you are lovely.” That opens up a whole new place within. Expansive abundance. Like resurrection.

Maybe you were a guest at an event with unfamiliar people in an unfamiliar place, lost, searching, until someone with a bit more clout called you by name, and said, come this way- you’re with me. Suddenly you were able to stand tall in your belovedness and move forward. And we know what it is like when that doesn’t happen.

Jesus promises us an advocate who will be with us forever. The Greek word translated as advocate is paraclete. It carries the connotation of a defence attorney. Like I heard recently- We know the other lawyer. The prosecutor. Satan. The one who accuses day and night. However that manifests for you we know the messages.

Jesus also promises that he will not leave us orphaned. Isn’t this always the promise of Easter? No geography of space or heart, no alienation, despair, detour, doubt, disconnection, death, or

¹ See the poem St. Francis and the Sow for the origin (to me) of the phrase “reteach a thing its loveliness.”

death-dealing words- no matter how piercing will keep him from you any longer. Remember, our defense attorney.

In our second reading Jesus goes to preach to the spirits in prison. This is where we get the descent into hell in the creed. As Fred Neidner said, speaking of Noah's Ark, these are all the people that didn't make the boat. He continues- "What does Jesus preach in hell? The same thing he preaches everywhere, "come with me, we've got stuff to do." Or- "from now on you're with me." There is no Hell that will keep the Risen Christ from you-- he's in your corner. You have an advocate even there so you always have a future. What would it look like for us to advocate for those living in all kinds of hell?

To re-member them? When you stand in your belovedness there is no telling where you might go.

What a joy to celebrate Matthew's baptism today. By water and the word Matthew has been joined to Jesus' death and resurrection. Connected to Jesus' body forever. The Holy Spirit now takes up residence in his body and will never move out. "The one that is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." We are bound to one another and the whole family of God. All advocates and champions for each other's new life. In each other's corner-- "co-workers, co-advocates together in the kingdom of God." You advocate for my new life and I for yours.

We get to defend one another from the piercing arrows of the prosecutor. I have it on good authority: You are forgiven. You belong. You are loved unconditionally. You have gifts that we need to receive. You are alive. How might someone best advocate for you? Reteach you your loveliness.

What would it be like to hear those words coming from God's own voice? How might we advocate for the abundant life of others- not yet a part of this community?

I've seen how you advocate for one another. Whether in your professional vocation or in your vocation as pew neighbors. You speak up, use your privilege to open doors for others, mentor young people, call out the gifts of others, help one another find internships, jobs, second opinions, housing, friendship-- with a well placed word or connection.

Like Matthew, you are right where you belong. God is not far away. In the Triune God we live and move and have our being. You have been placed in a spacious landscape. You are not forgotten. There is no competing for space here, no earning or deserving- just room to stretch out into all God is creating you to be. Here: it all belongs. No judgment. Just grace- from start to finish. Sometimes we are the advocates and sometimes we can allow ourselves to be advocated for. Like so much in resurrection, the roles get blurred in the choreography of grace.

Advocacy is like love made flesh.

Throughout Christian History, the resurrection has been depicted in two ways. One has Jesus alone and the other is communal. Jesus, along with Adam and Eve, all creation, being raised together. Resurrection is a community project. When we all stand in our belovedness there is no telling where we might go.