Beginnings and Endings

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My family, our inner circle and I find ourselves in an extraordinary moment. My husband, best friend and partner of twenty years, Ava and Isabelle’s father, Kent and Carol’s son-in-law is in the process of walking towards God and physically departing from this worldly realm.

While I had hoped to talk about other things today, and slow roll our introduction into the community (and wrote two other sermons along the way trying to get to this one) after Kate Lasso’s teaching the other week, I realized that this time with you here today was meant to be spent introducing myself and my family to you.

So today I will share with you about the genesis of Bruce and me. It is my hope that you find pieces of yourself in us: pieces of love, of loss, pieces of The Other, that you can connect with, learn from, and allow you to see the divine within yourself and others with more color, more clarity.

But, first, I’m going to start with the most recent past, why we are here. Most of you know that we have been living in Germany for the past five years. I came back just last August.

The first few weeks I was here, a friend from 8th day and I got together. They looked at me straight in the eyes and asked me in the kindest, most curious way, “Why are you here?” I love that question. I ask it often of myself and others. In fact, it’s the most important question. It’s God’s question to us. Why are you here? But that’s not the way they meant it of course — they really just wanted to know how I ended up in this place at this moment. I imagine that if that was their question, it is also a question shared by others.

I have always been nonconformist, something I owe to Eighth Day in no small part, I am sure. I also married a nonconformist. And further, our relationship is nonconformist. This much nonconformity does not always lend itself so easily to community.

It is only within the last few years that I experienced as an adult a diverse, positive, non-judgmental, close community. When we moved to Germany five years ago, I had to make some huge adaptations to survive the emotional and logistical challenges of starting a new life in a new country with a newborn, Ava. To my surprise, I experienced for the first time as an adult that I could fall back on a community of strangers, and be “caught,” without having to change who I was. I experienced a diverse community of people from so many walks of life, with a kaleidoscope of beliefs, and values, and somehow, we were all interconnected and dependent upon one another.

I also observed this sense of community in every village, city, and country in which we travelled. I often travelled specifically to watch these shared experiences play out in collective scenes of honoring, mourning and celebrating. I remember looking over the balcony in our rented apartment overlooking the Plaza de Mayor in Madrid during *el Semana de santos* … which is the week before easter where the city shuts down huge areas, twenty to thirty blocks large, at different times of day to allow these incredible processions of faith, honor and mourning. Everyone was in unison. From the most devout to the least devout who were simply afraid of God or their mothers’ wrath for not attending, everyone was invested in this beautiful, shared experience.

Could you even imagine that in DC? A whole week where everyone just stops, gets the moment and comes together. It’s one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever witnessed on many levels. In this and many other moments throughout my time there, I began to imagine the potential of community, especially a spiritual community, how at its best, it could provide catharsis and spiritual growth, while maintaining personal identities and honoring individual stories. So, as I told my friend, that is why I am here. Seeing if it’s a good fit, if I can hit that mark in this old/new place, during this season of my life.

 Living in Europe was as magical and exciting as it sounds. We did things that only a few people get to do. We traveled extensively, ate and drank well, and were forever transformed by the most beautiful places in the world and all the art and energy that surrounds them. But accompanying this extraordinary privilege of being there, we also experienced some of the most soul-crushing times of our lives.

When Ava was ten months old, we went to Austria for this first time, and I was in a skiing accident that could easily have taken my life. I shattered my tibia and tore my ACL, was helicoptered off of a mountain to the nearest surgeon to have emergency surgery, traumatically ripped away from my family and Ava, who was still nursing.

A year and a half later, Bruce was diagnosed with cancer for the first time. We wrestled with the potential of losing him. While he fought inside, we cared for him outside, taking him to chemo and radiation treatments while in the height of Covid, watched him suffer, dealing with all the uncertainty of our future. However, at that time the cancer had an 85% five-year -remission rate so we were also optimistic that he would recover and have much more time with us. Then, about a year after his initial remission, we were surprised with our third child, Salome, who passed in the womb and was birthed at twenty-one weeks old. I lost so much blood while birthing her that I needed three transfusions. We mourned the loss of her and fought not to lose ourselves and each other. Eight months after that, we moved back here and three months after that found out Bruce’s cancer had metastasized. And eight months later we find ourselves here.

So, while we are among the most privileged in the world for what we have been able to do and see in the past five years, we were also equally ravaged by our time overseas. Our Isabelle and Ava did all of this with us, hand in hand. Aside from their dad, they are the wisest, deepest, most resilient and courageous humans I know. We went through all of this with no immediate family to lean on, just each other and our community, our chosen family we found there.

Come, let us return to the Lord.
He has torn us to pieces
    but he will heal us;
he has injured us
    but he will bind up our wounds. (Hosea 6:1)

How do we make this a vibrant community that walks in Jesus’s path of truth and love? We start here. We don’t wait for others to say what we feel. We have courage. We stand up here and we speak our own truth. We find our story. And in that context of those God tales, the humanity of the bible, we synthesize our pain, our joys into something meaningful.

Because making it personal always helps things stick, and clarity of story is essential for proper beginnings and endings, i will begin with sharing about an unimaginable gift, one God gave me many years ago and changed my life forever. I begin twenty years ago when I met my life-partner whom I have chosen and choose everyday since, the person with whom I have experienced so many highs and lows, and whom I’ve, brick by brick, built a beautiful life with, a life that despite so many tremendous obstacles and sacrifices we carefully cultivated together, and I am proud of. Our story is a story of acknowledging the truth of our shadows and the truth of our love, love seeded by God. We saved each other. We are an example of Love’s redemption in the midst of overwhelming personal tragedy, an immutable light in the middle of vast darkness.

In telling part of my story, our story, I hope to remind you of the many intricacies and facets of God’s plan for us all and maybe illuminate the things that might be getting in the way of expressing true unconditional love to people around you. Our story is about finding connection with God and in one another in the most unlikely places. It’s about opening our hearts to the possibility that embracing our shadows allows the light to shine through, allows God into our lives: how pain and weakness and suffering can lead to something better — that is, if you trust the love that God sends to you, AND choose to love back. God can take even our darkest moments and mold our lives into something incredibly beautiful that brings new life and inspiration. Our story is one of the many legacies of God’s love.

So, we begin with two people, weary, with little love in their lives and estranged from those who they had counted on to love them most. Sometimes even the most well-intentioned people in our lives, our parents, our partners (who are our “attachment figures” for those familiar with attachment science — that was my first sermon) they love us their way but do not truly see us as we grow, do not change with us, do not love us the way we need them to. Sometimes they have their own unresolved fears and traumas that get in the way of truth and growth. Attempts from our respective attachments to control, and not adapt, to the changing needs of the relationship created cracks, eventually leading to detachment, emotionally, spiritually and physically. This was an extremely lonely, painful, experience, one Bruce and I each individually had for years before our worlds collided.

When Bruce and I met, a palpable undeniable manifestation of magic occurred, as if a spell of love had been cast over us. Somehow, in a world full of strict rules and social norms about connection and age (Bruce being twenty-seven years older than I) both adrift and navigating our own respective loneliness, we found each other. Shockingly, we SAW one another, experienced an unexpected electric spark, which was really jolting and bizarre considering our very, very different worlds: me, a free-spirited hippie and he a former free-spirited hippie hidden in the body of an air force officer. This connection kept surprising us and catching us off guard, as if the universe, God, had intended it just for us and we just needed to get with the program.

Once we gave us a chance, we quickly came to an intersection of a very impossible choice: Could we live the rest of our lives knowing we had thrown away this overwhelming gift of love because of social norms? It was such an overwhelming moment for us both, this heart and mind-bending connection which had appeared out of the blue, asking this question of us.

I’ve always thought and acted towards love as if it were a person, a living being with energy; when love is present it is to be cared for and nurtured for it is living evidence that beauty exists, that God exists, in the world. So even I wondered in this moment if it would be some sort of sacrilege to reject our love? Was this mess a divine gift?

We broke up and got back together many times debating our future. It was a gut-and-soul-wrenching time. I actually remember with extraordinary clarity this moment, for it was in that moment I knew this day would come, and it broke my heart. I cried and cried knowing that, for some portion of my life, which we thought would be later, we wouldn’t have one another.

But in the end, with clear and wide eyes, we said yes, signed up to all the consequences and benefits of our choices. We chose love. Our Undeniable love. I am so glad we did. It’s always the right choice.

Over the early months, years, we excavated the hidden diamonds within one another and began to build each other up in real ways. Everyday devotion, each conversation, each loving move of confidence in one another, slowly leading to our growth inside and out. Eventually opportunities to grow and build up others and the world around us began to manifest. There were many challenges along the way — interpersonal, familial and societal — but our love carried us. Somehow, even when we hurt each other the most, we could tap into this magic that we had from the beginning, this ocean of love so deep and profound, and easily find a way through.

We started out with nothing and about a year after we had lived together in our first apartment, we bought the cheapest house we could find, the same house we live in today. It was very small, had no central air and a terribly soiled orange shag carpet from the 1970s. When we moved in one of the first things that I noticed living in our new suburban neighborhood was people’s reaction to us. Most were cautious, suspicious, distant. They had no idea what to make of us and our age gap. We also experienced this with both of our families. My family because of that gap and also because he was an Air Force officer that worked at the Pentagon. His family, because I was so much younger, a mid-life cliché, and because of the painful changes that were being experienced by his previous partner and my now stepchildren. As an empath, I experienced this deeply and I suffered for years with significant depression.

On my first car, a cute little blue Hyundai Accent I had stenciled art all over; I also stenciled a quote in large lettering for all to see. This quote was from my favorite poet, Rumi, well before Rumi memes were a thing, and it said, “beyond ideas of rightdoing and wrongdoing, there is a field, I’ll meet you there.” The voice of The Other, my stake in the ground, a way of coping with the lack of invitation, the lack of connection.

Over time our families slowly came around to the reality of our relationship. Once they started to get curious about who we were, they saw our gifts and how we made each other better, happier. My family eventually began to learn that while Bruce did work at the Pentagon as a strategist, he was a new voice, a student of history and an iconoclast who did his best (and succeeded) to drastically change the Air Force and Department of Defense from the inside out, challenging and changing the toxic groupthink culture that has driven so many terrible decisions and military industrial complex bloat. Bruce’s family eventually began to see me for who I was, started to know my kindness, my artistic and intellectual gifts, my emotional intuition, love, joy and courage.

Those were the us-against-the-world early days but over time things changed dramatically, especially after we were married, about 6 years after we met. Our older daughters stood by his side as the women of honor at our wedding and stand by both of us and their younger sisters as we move through this painful shared journey of saying goodbye together.

We have also been extraordinarily blessed by the friendships we’ve made. Over the years we have been gifted by God with extraordinary people who love us deep and wide: Shana, Daniel, Ron, Dan, Jill, Pete, Gretchen, Ine, Maya, Lu, Dave, Danica, Fritz, Sol, Jay, Nilda, Dimitri: the most beautiful of people who didn’t allow fear or conventionality to dictate their experience of us, as individuals or a couple.

Let us acknowledge the Lord;
    let us press on to acknowledge him.
As surely as the sun rises,
    he will appear;
he will come to us like the winter rains,
    like the spring rains that water the earth. (Hosea 6:3)

So here we are, fully aware of what is coming, facing this loss and heartbreaking transition, taking each moment, each step, each day at a time, trying to be big enough to hold space for everybody’s pain.

And even though we walk in the valleys of the shadows of death, we will not fear darkness because you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4 Aramaic version translated to English)

In honor of this moment with you, and honor of our love, I would like to conclude with a prayer for us.

Lord, I invite you into this room, our hearts and our minds. I pray, Lord, that every soul listening has the experience of **outrageous authenticity** that can only be granted through knowing your love. May we become so comfortable with who we are and where we are in our journeys that we share our deepest truths, pain, shadows, and joy freely. And may this authenticity be met by a **resounding chorus of support and love**, inspired by you.

Lord I humbly ask that when we are in doubt about the motivations that we have, give us the courage to ask you for guidance. Help us discern whether our judgments are grounded in fear or love. May we hear over and over again the **thunderous clap of your wisdom and love**, **arresting us into silence and then, toward the requisite action that your will, the will of love, demands.**

We know Lord that when we choose love we are choosing you, the only path that lights the way.

Amen.