

September 8, 2013
Claire Feingold Thoryn
Theme: Relationships
Sermon: Homecoming

Time for All Ages: “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon

Where I’m From

I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening,
it tasted like beets.)
I am from the forsythia bush
the Dutch elm
whose long-gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.
I’m from fudge and eyeglasses,
from Imogene and Alafair.
I’m from the know-it-alls
and the pass-it-ons,
from Perk up! and Pipe down!
I’m from He restoreth my soul
with a cottonball lamb
and ten verses I can say myself.
I’m from Artemus and Billie’s Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger,
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.
Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
a sift of lost faces
to drift beneath my dreams.
I am from those moments--
snapped before I budded --
leaf-fall from the family tree.

Reading: “My Ancestral Home” by Louis Jenkins

We came to a beautiful little farm. From photos I’d seen I knew this was the place. The house and barn were painted in the traditional Falu red, trimmed with white. It was nearly mid-summer, the trees and grass, lush green, when we arrived the family was gathered at a table on the lawn for coffee and fresh strawberries. Introductions were made all around, Grandpa Sven, Lars-Olaf and Marie, Eric and Gudren, Cousin Inge and her two

children... It made me think of a Carl Larsson painting. But, of course, it was all modern, the Swedes are very up-to-date, Lars-Olaf was an engineer for Volvo, and they all spoke perfect English, except for Grandpa, and there was a great deal of laughter over my attempts at Swedish. We stayed for a long time laughing and talking. It was late in the day, but the sun was still high. I felt a wonderful kinship. It seemed to me that I had known these people all my life, they even looked like family back in the States. But as it turned out, we had come to the wrong farm. Lars-Olaf said, "I think I know your people, they live about three miles from here. If you like I could give them a call." I said that no, it wasn't necessary, this was close enough.

Here ends the reading.

Sermon: Coming Home

I knew this was the place. When I met you I felt a wonderful kinship. This sanctuary is an ancestral home, a spiritual home, and even though this is only my third time leading a service here, I too feel that today is my Homecoming Sunday.

My worship theme for this month is Relationships, in part because this will be a year of building our new relationship, as minister and congregation. The past few weeks I have asked you to share with me stories about meaningful relationships in your lives. As you share your stories with me, it is only fair to share some of who I am with you, where I'm from.

I'm from the chalice and the principles,
the menorah and the Christmas tree.
I'm from latkes and blue crabs,
casseroles and Hershey bar pie.
I'm from Ellis Island and compromises.
I'm from the valedictorians and the math class dropouts.
I'm from two left feet and four eyes.
I'm from loud laughter and quick opinions.
I'm from cartoons and library books
I'm from the weeping willow and the cheery azalea.
I'm from Mom Marge
and Grandpa Leon
And now my Marjory and Leona are from me.
"I am from those moments--
leaf-fall from the family tree."

And now, I am from you, too—or "close enough."

Last year, looking forward to this day, one of your interim ministers shared a bit of advice from the Episcopalian priest, Barbara Brown Taylor. Rev. Taylor wrote:

My beloved mentor had told me in seminary (that) being ordained is not about serving God perfectly but about serving God visibly, allowing other people to learn whatever they can from watching you rise and fall. “You probably won’t be much worse than other people,” he said, “and you certainly won’t be any better, but you will have to let people look at you. You will have to let them see you as you are.”

Sunday in and Sunday out, at evening meetings and all-church potlucks, you will see me as I am, and I will do my best for you. And in return, I hope you will share with me the great honor and privilege of allowing me to see you as you are. I promise to share the burden of your darkest hours, the ache of your deepest grief, the lift of your fizziest joys, the tangle of your messiest worries.

What I really hope is that we *all* can be who we really are, here in this church community. It’s so tempting to put on our shiny happy face on, the one we use for the general public, and just keep it on all the time. But it is my hope that here in church we can do better than that for each other. In worship and in covenant groups, in lay ministry and action teams, I hope that we can build relationships that go deep. I hope that we find a kinship that goes beyond family.

One of the first responders to my request for your resources about relationship sent me a beautiful story about what brought her to Follen, and what keeps her here now. At the writer’s request I won’t share with you who wrote it, and I changed a few names. I have to say in this case, I rather like the anonymity because it feels like a story that could be true for many people here today. So, a fellow Follen member, who could be sitting right next to you, wrote:

I didn’t realize the extent to which my life was sorting out my relationships. College away from home sifted out relationships from those who stayed in my home town, my major sifted out many other students from my life, living off campus in a fun but dilapidated apartment sifted out those who prefer clean, reliable and organized living, moving to Cambridge and working at a non-profit sifted further. Relationships were very easy to build in such self-selected affinity groups that I traveled in. I thought I got along with everyone and that friendships were made easily.

Then I had a kid and got laid off and stayed home. Suddenly all I had in common with my mommy peers was the age of my child. It was like going back to high school where you had to work hard to find your people. It was a challenge to navigate so many people whose values and experiences were so different than mine. I was lonely, I began to question my instincts...[I wondered] “What’s wrong with me?”

Then at the playground I met [Sarah]. Sarah laughed at my jokes, enjoyed her daughter richly, and didn’t worry about her “stuff,” but had an eclectic, creative, informal and joyful home environment. It felt like coming home. The friendship

gave me the backbone to parent from my heart, ...[and] the friendship gave me a lot of fun. Our families liked each other. Sarah invited me to come to Follen. There you have it.

She goes on to say:

Relationships at Follen aren't all an easy fit. Follen has [people] who take more patience from me than others, but they are still "mine." Real community includes finding a place for people who don't fit you easily and working through your differences. It doesn't mean I don't whine and grumble but in the end both the friendships that sustain me and the people that are hard for me make Follen a place for me to grow. I know [that someone] will be there for me and I for him whether it takes work to be together or not. We don't dismiss each other and [we] know there is a lot under the surface. We'll still work together and sometimes I am pleasantly surprised.

Preach it, Sister! That is IT. That is what I hope for all of us in this church community. I hope we feel invited in. I hope we invite others in. I hope we find spiritual soul mates here AND I hope we find people here that we disagree with, who push us to work a little harder.

Sometimes "family" can a good metaphor for the ideal church community, but I am cautious about using it too much, because families come in all shapes and sizes and levels of brokenness and dysfunction. Family isn't always positive metaphor for many people. I often fall back to the words Martin Luther King Jr. used to describe his high ideal: the "beloved community." I love how the poet in this morning's reading discovered a wonderful kinship with people who turned out not to be his family at all...but "close enough." And who knows, maybe they were even better than the real thing.

Years ago, when I was a ministerial intern at a church in New Jersey, I had given the sermon one Sunday, and after the service, a very elderly gentleman, a pillar of the church, came up to me, and took my hand. He looked into my eyes and said, "I like you very much. I disagree with *everything* you just said. But I like you very much." And isn't that church? Isn't that community—kinship—or close enough?

We don't have to think alike to love alike.

I received other stories about how important the relationships in this community have been to you. I heard how Follen's youth group FUUY has the effect of "seeding" the high school with built-in friends. With familiar friendly faces already in the halls and classrooms, our youth don't have to work so hard to find "their people."

Covenant groups at Follen are another way this community cares for its members. Almost half of our congregation takes part in these small groups of about 10 people each, that gather once a month to share deeply from their life and practice sacred listening with each other. A group leader frames and protects the group dynamic so that everyone can

listen and feel listened to. It's not a social gathering; it's not group therapy. It is a gathering of what we could call "*anam cara*"—the ancient Celtic word that means "soul friend." These relationships are very special, and anyone can join.

One of you told me about how her covenant group helped her get through a long difficult stage in her life. Her children were not well, and she too was struggling with depression, sorrow and anxiety. She described her covenant group as her spiritual home during this time, the place where she could put her struggles into a spiritual context. As she put it, "[My] group members held me in their hearts and cared for me simply by standing by me and faithfully listening to my heartache. I had professional help during this time, too. But a therapist is not a spiritual guide."

The poet describes an idyllic reunion with family members in his ancestral home, as they sit and drink coffee and eat strawberries. He writes:

We stayed for a
long time laughing and talking, It was late in
the day, but the sun was still high. I felt a won-
derful kinship. It seemed to me that I had
known these people all my life, they even
looked like family.

And then, of course, he breaks the spell:

But as it
turned out, we had come to the wrong farm.

Lars-Olaf said, "I think I know your people, they
live about three miles from here. If you like I
could give them a call." I said that no, it wasn't
necessary, this was close enough.

This is close enough. We are from different places, people, backgrounds. We may not all agree. We may have pancakes and juice instead of coffee and strawberries. There will be times when this community will disappoint us or frustrate us, because we are all human. Human beings aren't perfect, at anything. And so we may whine and grumble, and then I hope we will try again; begin again in love.

Our kinship is something we choose, and choose again, each time we come here on Sunday morning, each time we start a conversation with someone we don't recognize at coffee hour, each time we listen deeply, each time we speak with honesty and kindness. I know that there are a lot of ways that we could choose to spend our Sunday mornings. Thank you for choosing Follen, thank you for choosing each other, and thank you for choosing me.

What a wonderful kinship I feel.
It seems to me that I have known you all my life.

May we strive to be soul friends to each other.
May we listen and learn from each other.
May we care for and challenge each other.

May we find a wonderful kinship
In this place of faith and hope.

And may we have a good and sweet year together.

Amen.