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Theme: Teachers
Sermon: The Long Bag We Drag Behind Us

Call to Worship:

Our worship theme this month has been teachers. Any person, any thing, any experience can be our teacher, if we are open to learning, open to changing, open to growing our souls.

May we enter this time of worship with openness. May we bring all of who we have been, all of who we are and all of who we wish to be into this space and offer it up in the service of the most holy. May we walk together in our search for truth and meaning.

Reading: “Gratitude to Old Teachers” by Robert Bly

When we stride or stroll across the frozen lake,
We place our feet where they have never been.
We walk upon the unwalked. But we are uneasy.
Who is down there but our old teachers?

Water that once could take no human weight—
We were students then—holds up our feet,
And goes on ahead of us for a mile.
Beneath us the teachers, and around us the stillness.

Sermon: The Long Bag We Drag Behind Us

Perhaps it is odd, now that spring is finally here, to be using a reading that uses a frozen lake as a metaphor for all the teachers whose lessons gave us a foundation to walk on.

But even with spring here, I confess that my home is in an endless winter. Yes it is true: my 4 year old loves the movie *Frozen*. It actually is a great movie—even my friends Matt and Joe, who don’t have kids yet, admitted that for their last date night they got take-out and rented *Frozen* and loved every second of it, two grown men sitting on a couch and watching an animated princess movie.

If you haven’t seen it, and are wondering why on earth it is SO popular, especially among children these days, here is the gist: a princess named Elsa is mysteriously born with the power of ice and snow. But she can’t control it, especially when she is feeling fear and anger. In using her powers, she accidentally hurts her little sister Ana. Ana’s life is saved by some magical trolls, who tell Elsa’s parents that Elsa’s true enemy is *fear*.

Elsa's parents decide the only way to keep everyone safe is for Elsa to hide her emotions and repress her powers.

After the girls grow up, Elsa becomes queen. But then one day Elsa gets angry and afraid in front of everyone, and her powers are exposed. She runs away, covering her kingdom in snow, creating a magical palace of ice. And she sings the song "Let it Go" that is truly the soundtrack of my life these days, because if my daughter isn't singing it, someone else's kid is:

Don't let them in, don't let them see
Be the good girl you always have to be
Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know
Well, now they know

Let it go, let it go
Can't hold it back anymore
Let it go, let it go
Turn away and slam the door

It's time to see what I can do
To test the limits and break through
No right, no wrong, no rules for me
I'm free

Well now you know.

It's a song about living into your full self, even the parts of you that seems scary or shameful.

And ultimately, the movie is about finding that your family and friends will love you anyway, just as you are:

Light and shadows,
warmth and ice.

Love heals.

Robert Bly, the author of our reading, describes his walk across a frozen lake, as a metaphor of gratitude for his old teachers.

They let him walk over unwalkable places.
They hold him up.
He is grateful and also, he says, uneasy.

How strange it is to think of all the intangible lessons we have been given as ice under our feet, as teachers holding us up so we can walk where no one could walk before.

Robert Bly is also an essayist who has written a lot about the shadow side of human nature. In *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*, he says that we are born with a “360 degree personality.”

His metaphor describes a young child, energy radiating outwards from their whole body and whole psyche, a ball of light, “living globe of energy.” But then, as he writes:

[O]ne day we noticed that our parents didn’t like certain parts of that ball. They said things like, ‘Can’t you be still?’ or ‘It isn’t nice to try and kill your brother.’ Behind us, we have an invisible bag, and the part of us our parents don’t like, we, to keep our parents’ love, put in the bag. By the time we go to school, our bag is quite large. Then our teachers have their say: ‘Good children don’t get angry over such little things.’ So we take our anger and put it in the bag.

Robert Bly continues, saying:

By the time my brother and I were twelve in Madison, Minnesota, we were known as ‘the nice Bly boys.’ Our bags were already a mile long. Then we do a lot of bag-stuffing in high school. This time it’s no longer the evil grown-ups that pressure us, but people our own age.

So...out of [that living] round globe of energy [we start with], the twenty-year-old ends up with a thin slice — the rest is in the bag. We spend our life until we’re twenty deciding what parts of ourselves to put into the bag, and [then] we spend the rest of our lives trying to get them out again.

Over the years I have contemplated this image, the long bag we drag behind us, full of all these beautiful shining pieces of ourselves we have been told are ugly. And so we walk around as mere slivers, little crescent moons, dragging our long bag of shadows behind us.

In Robert Bly’s metaphor, he says

...When we put a part of ourselves in the bag it regresses. It de-evolves toward barbarism. Suppose a young man seals a bag at twenty and then waits 15 or 20 years before he opens it again. What will he find? Sadly, the sexuality, the wildness, the impulsiveness, the anger, the freedom he put in there have all regressed; they are not only primitive in mood, they are hostile to the person who opens the bag. The man or woman who opens their bag [for the first time] at 45 rightfully feels fear...

As Bly says in the poem...we are uneasy.
Who is down there but our old teachers?

Our shadows hold many lessons for us.

Over time, as I turned this metaphor over and over again in my mind, I also started thinking about how the only real 360 degree person, in Bly's metaphor, is a baby or small child or, let's be honest here, a sociopath. A 360 degree person just does whatever he or she wants to do. If the 360 degree person is angry he screams, if he wants something he'll grab for it. "No, it isn't nice to try and kill your brother." But a 360 degree person doesn't care.

So when I think about the contents of this long bag of shadows, yes there are a lot of shining beautiful pieces of ourselves in there. But I think there are also a lot of scratchy, rotting, sharp pieces of ourselves in the bag too. There are pieces of our personality that we carve away for good purpose: to connect meaningfully and compassionately with each other and our communities.

There is spectrum between learning to live authentically and creatively and freely, and also listening to feedback and learning from it and changing to become a better person. Not everything that gets stuffed in the bag needs to come back out exactly as it went in.

To continue using *Frozen* as a metaphor—and I really do sincerely apologize but I am going to do it anyway—when Elsa stuffs her power in her metaphorical long bag, in the movie's case a pair of gloves, and tries to conceal and not feel, she is sad and angry. But then when she pulls the power out again—by taking off her gloves and being free—she also ends up hurting everyone and everything she loves.

It is only at the end, when she works to control and master her power, that she can both fully express her creative gifts AND live among her people again. And yes, everyone lives happily ever after.

Stuffing parts of our personality in the bag is not necessarily a bad thing. What is bad is if we stuff it in—conceal don't feel!—and then don't look at it again to see what we can learn from this difficult and cantankerous teacher. If, instead of sealing the bag, we peek into it, again and again over the course of our life, if we reach in and pick up the pieces and hold them up to the light and reflect on them, then over the course of our life we may find that things in the bag we *can* express in ways that are life-giving and creative—like anger, and other things we can't—like fratricide. That has to stay in the bag.

And that is okay. Because we aren't just individual "globes of energy." Our energy connects and affects everyone else's. Our circles of light overlap.

Being a 360 degree person and letting all your light shine, however you want, all the time, is not an ideal I would shoot for. That kind of light can be blinding, painful, it can drive the people who love you away.

The shadows can make us gentler.
They can help us love our neighbor as ourselves.

Bly's metaphor feels sad: this thin slice of light, next to a big heavy bag of shadows. But a contrasting image came to my mind: a huge block of marble. A sculptor comes along—or perhaps many, many sculptors—and each takes lots of little chips out of the block. And finally, over the course of a life, the big rough block of marble becomes a beautiful sculpture.

The marble is lessened, it is smaller than it was, and there are long heavy bags of rubble all over the floor around it. But the marble has finally become what it needed to be. It shines.

Here is one of my favorite stories about a great teacher who helped someone carve away some of their personality in a way that helped them live more fully.

You may have heard of Randy Pausch, the professor who became famous for his poignant and wise “Last Lecture” given as he faced death from terminal cancer.

Randy admits he had always been a know-it-all, a little too confident in his abilities for his own good. One friend he met freshman year later told him that he had “a total lack of tact, and [was] universally acclaimed as the person quickest to offend someone he had just met.”

Then Randy was picked by a legendary computer science professor, Andy van Dam, to be his teaching assistant. Andy saw Randy's strengths, but also saw how his personality was holding him back. One day he took Randy for a walk, and put his arm around him, and said, “Randy, it's such a shame that people perceive you as being so arrogant, because it's going to limit what you're going to be able to accomplish in life.”

Randy reflected in his book, “He was actually saying, ‘Randy, you're being a jerk.’ But he said it in a way that made me open to his criticisms, to listening to my hero tell me something I needed to hear.

...Ever since my last lecture began spreading on the internet, more than a few friends have been ribbing me about it, calling me ‘St. Randy.’ It's their way of reminding me that there were times I've been described in other, more colorful ways....I've been lucky enough to benefit over the years from people like Andy, who have cared enough to tell me the tough-love things that I needed to hear.”¹

Randy's teacher basically told him to stuff it. Stuff that arrogance and rudeness and jerkiness into the bag. And he did. And he became, from his own account, a kinder person, a more loving person, a man with many friends and colleagues and a family and a lasting legacy.

¹ Pausch, *Last Lecture*, 67-68.

Yes he was dragging a long bag of shadows behind him. But that bag set him free to shine in ways that blessed rather than burned. Randy's teacher turned the water that Randy was floundering in into ice, a foundation for him to walk on.

So back to *Frozen*. Or rather, *Frozen* in an alternate universe. There is a web series called "How It Should Have Ended." They make 3 minute cartoons about, perhaps you have guessed, how popular movies should have ended.

So in this short cartoon, inspired by *Frozen*, the writers re-imagine Elsa's parents talking to the magical trolls about Elsa's strange and terrifying powers, when Elsa is still a little girl. The troll warns, just as he does in the real movie, that *fear* is Elsa's real enemy, not her powers.

But then the cartoon departs from the real movie by having the parents say to the troll: "Soooo... what you're saying is we should lock her up in her room alone until she's safe to be around? ... teach her to be scared of herself? Conceal don't feel?"

And the troll says "What? No! You guys are terrible parents! Don't do any of those things! The answer is LOVE! Love thaws, pure love heals."

The parents look at the troll blankly, and the troll sighs and says, "Oh just come with me, I know a place that can help."

And in the next scene, a bald man in a wheelchair with a British accent is saying to Elsa, "Hello, Elsa. My name is Charles Xavier. Welcome to my school...for gifted youngsters."

A Disney princess as one of the X-men? I can dream.

Yes, a truly great teacher, coming along at just the right time, can make all the difference.

And so I pray:

May we find that both the light and the shadows

Are our teachers.

May we be open to learning something from all that we encounter.

And may love heal us all.

Amen.