

“Place, No Place, and the Place of Hardship in the Great Chain of Hope”
 Trinity Sunday C (June 16, 2019)
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word, Amen.<<

In her book *Braving the Wilderness*, researcher and inspirational speaker Brené Brown shares a series of personal stories about feeling out of place.¹ This feeling started when she moved from Texas to New Orleans as a child in the late 1960s, and began attending an elementary school that had just been desegregated. She found it difficult to fit in, because of her name. She writes that the lists of students’ names in her new school “were used to determine *everything* - from attendance records to birthday party invitations.” Brené Brown’s full name is Cassandra Brené Brown. The name Cassandra in the late ‘60s was a common name for African-American girls, but Cassandra Brené Brown is white. “Maybe this explained why I was being left out of so many of my white friends’ [birthday] parties,” she writes. Parents sent out invitations based on the names on the list, and assumed that Brené was black. “The black families were welcoming to me,” she goes on, “but their shock was noticeable when I walked through the door.” They assumed she was black too. Eventually Brené’s parents transferred her to a Catholic parochial school. The problem there, she writes, was that “I was an Episcopalian, which made me one of the only non-Catholic students in my school.” One day Brené was called down to the bishop’s office in the school. “He handed me a . . . copy of the Nicene Creed,” she remembers, “and we went through it, line by line. When we were done, he handed me a note to take home to my parents. The note read, ‘Brené is Catholic now.’” Brené’s family soon left Houston for Washington D.C. when she was in the sixth grade. Then they left Washington D.C. to move back to Houston when she was in the eighth grade. Her only constant through all of this change and out-of-placeness was her family; but her parents would eventually get a divorce, and she felt out of place even in her family. Brené remembers being “filled with grief and longing. Grief for the girl who never belonged anywhere and a longing to figure out who [she] was, what [she] liked, what [she] believed in, and where [she] wanted to go.”

There’s another story Brené Brown shares in *Braving the Wilderness*. It happened when she was in Chicago as an adult preparing to speak at one of the largest leadership conferences in the world. “The event organizers had *strongly* recommended that I wear ‘business attire’ to the event,” she writes. “And I was staring down at my black slacks and pumps and feeling like an imposter. Or, like I was going to a funeral. I was sitting with another speaker . . . , and she asked how I was doing. I confessed that I was coming out of my skin and that I couldn’t shake the feeling of playing dress-up. She told me I looked ‘really nice,’ but the expression on her face said, *I know. It’s hard. But what can we do?* I abruptly stood up, grabbed my suitcase from a wall lined with suitcases belonging to the other speakers, and went to the restroom. Minutes later, I came out in a navy shirt, dark jeans, and clogs. The woman looked at me, smiled, and said, ‘Awesome. You’re brave.’” To which Brené responded with a laugh, “‘Not really. It’s a necessity. I can’t go on that stage and talk about authenticity and courage when I don’t feel authentic or brave. I physically can’t do it. I’m not here so my business self can talk to their business selves. I’m here to talk from my heart to their hearts. This is who I am.’”

¹ Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (London: Vermilion, 2017), ch. 1.

Brené Brown uses these personal stories to illustrate out-of-placeness. It's something we all experience at some point in life, some of us more intensely than others, whether out of place in school or out of place in our families or out of place in our careers or with peers or uncertain of the future or even out of place in our own skin. We all seek "true belonging," writes Brené Brown. It's one reason why Pride month every June with Pride parades and rainbow flags is such an important celebration - it's a statement that everyone has a place, everyone belongs.

Between my sophomore and junior years of high school, my family moved to Harrington Park, NJ. It meant switching high schools for me, making new friends, trying out for a new baseball team, finding *my* place in a new place. My cousin, who is one year younger than me, lived a few towns over in Bergen County, and she made me her project. She took me to the mall to revamp my look: new clothes, new shoes, new haircut, the works. She was the eager sculptor; I was her lump of clay. But even though my outside looked presentable, at least according to my cousin, I still faced all the "firsts" of starting out in a new school: first homeroom, first time fumbling with the locker combination, first day of classes, first lonely lunch in the cafeteria looking out at a sea of strange faces laughing and talking. My junior year English teacher, Mr. Falk, helped me find my place. Mr. Falk had been a Marine in Vietnam. He was tough, funny, intense, and a little bit nuts. But he pulled me aside after class one day in my first week, and asked with all the tenderness of a concerned father, "How are you doing?" He wouldn't let me leave until I told him the truth; and he gave me a hall pass to my next class. Sometimes that's all it takes to help a scared kid start to find their place. I kept in touch with Mr. Falk for years after high school.

In today's scripture reading from Romans, St. Paul writes as a concerned and tender father to the fledgling church in the city of Rome. The Letter to the Romans is all about belonging, or "true belonging" as Brené Brown calls it; and the verses we heard a moment ago from Romans 5 touch on key themes Paul develops throughout the letter. Of course, whenever we read the New Testament letters, it's always good to keep in mind that we're reading someone else's mail - two thousand year old mail, in fact. Paul wasn't writing to us. And yet, his words have a timeless quality even if his writing style is dense and challenging to unpack. So, let me get wonky for a moment as I unpack the context of Paul's letter before returning to Romans 5. Paul wrote this letter to ethnic gentile followers of Jesus in first century Rome. There were ethnic Jews in the congregation as well, but they were listening in as this old rabbi explained to gentiles their place in Abraham's family of faith - Abraham, the patriarch of faith from the Bible's first book of Genesis and the father of three monotheistic traditions. In this letter, Paul uses the image of an olive tree to describe this family of faith: Abraham and Sarah, and their biological descendants in Judaism are like an olive tree, writes Paul; *gentiles* who follow Jesus are like a wild branch *grafted* onto this tree. In another place in Romans, Paul borrows a Roman legal term, "adoption," to describe this family of faith: Abraham and Sarah, and their biological descendants in Judaism are the *natural* heirs of God's promises, he writes; gentiles are heirs by *adoption*. And in still another place, Paul uses the language of election to describe this family of faith: Abraham and Sarah, and their biological descendants in Judaism are, he says, God's *elect*. In Christ, he goes on, gentiles *also* share in this election.

Paul takes such fatherly care to describe the family of faith because then, as now, some non-Jews had engaged in anti-Semitic discourse. In fact, the immediate context of this letter

was an edict issued by the Roman Emperor Claudius in the year 49 CE that expelled all ethnic Jews from the city of Rome, because of religion. The temptation for the gentiles remaining in the city was to see this anti-Semitic decree as a form of God's judgment. Paul writes to quell this belief. We might even call the Letter to the Romans, the New Testament's oldest attempt to battle hate speech.

In the passage we heard a moment ago from Romans 5, Paul writes that the family of faith, comprised of ethnic Jews and gentiles - comprised of all God's children - is a single family where everyone has a place, because - writes Paul in his creative way - all people experience hardship. The Greek word he uses could be translated as "pressing" or "pressure" or even "stress." Such hardship, such pressure can produce resilience, writes Paul; and resilience, he argues, can develop character; and character, he argues, can lead to hope - hope that says we can make it through; hope that trusts in a God who moves in a mysterious way in the midst of the pressures we face, as that great hymn says, in order to develop our faith. God is at work to build us up in ways we cannot always predict; and oftentimes it's at the conclusion of life's most trying times that we can look back and see what we've learned, how we've grown, how our character has been strengthened, even though we might also say to ourselves, "I never want to go through that again." Maybe Paul is challenging us to look back and those times of pressure and examine the lessons we learned from them. What lessons can we pass on to others? What compassionate presence can we provide to those who are struggling now? Maybe Paul is challenging us to find the seeds of hope in the pressures we've faced or are facing now. Maybe he's asking us to look for the mysterious hand of God - that "eternal father strong to save who's arm has bound the restless wave," as another hymn says. In her book *Braving the Wilderness*, Brené Brown writes about the struggles and pressures we all face: "We [all] feel love and we know pain," she writes. "We [all] feel hope and we know struggle. We [all] see beauty and we survive trauma. We don't all have the protection of privilege and the luxury of anonymity. We're trying to build connected and loving lives while we pack lunches, drive, carpool, go to jobs, and [try to enjoy] as many moments of joy as we can."² The lesson she's trying to teach is that no one needs to suffer alone.

It's a lesson that Sheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook learned when her husband died tragically at the age of 47. In her book *Option B*, Sandberg draws from her terrible experience to encourage readers that life's most difficult times can be weathered. She tells two stories that stand out for me as life lessons. The first was on the day she and her children, then in the second and fourth grades, got out of the car at the cemetery. "When we arrived at the cemetery," she recounted, "my children got out of the car and fell to the ground, unable to take another step. I lay on the grass, holding them as they wailed. Their cousins came and lay down with us, all piled up in a big sobbing heap with adult arms trying in vain to protect them from their sorrow." Sandberg told her children, "This is the second worst moment of our lives. We lived through the first and we will live through this. It can only get better from here." She then started singing a song she knew from childhood, "Oseh Shalom," a prayer for peace. She writes [in her book], "I don't remember deciding to sing or how I picked this song. I later learned that it is the last line of the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for mourning, which may explain why it poured out of me. Soon all the adults joined in, the children followed, and the wailing stopped." "These moments," she writes, "remind us that we are not alone in our darkness and that our broken heart is connected to every heart that has known pain since the beginning of time."

² Brown, *Braving the Wilderness*, 63-64.

The second story Sandberg tells is about posting about her pain on Facebook. One night she typed up a therapeutic post which she never intended to share. But “I woke up the next morning,” she said, feeling “really terrible. I felt so awful. I thought, ‘You know what? I’m going to post this because things aren’t going to get worse. They might get better.’” “It actually helped so much,” she remembered. “It did not take away the grief, but it took away a bunch of the isolation. A friend from work [commented on my post that] she had been driving by my house almost every day and had never come in [but that now she would start because she knew] I needed her. [Other] strangers posted, ‘I’ve lost this person. I’ve lost a twin. I lost a baby. I lost a husband.’ Rather than feel so isolated, I felt connected to all of these people who were experiencing loss, and breaking the isolation really helped.” The journal entries that poured out of Sandberg as she continued to grieve formed the foundation of her book *Option B*. Social media created the forum for her - an online community - for emotional honesty and support.

... I wonder if St. Paul were around today whether he would write social media posts instead of snail-mail letters - posts like Sheryl Sanderberg’s that can encourage we people of faith in the midst of hardship and pressure and stress; encourage us to draw from our experiences wisdom for living to build supportive communities in church; communities that teach us to trust “the eternal Father strong to save,” as the hymn puts it; to trust the “God who moves in a mysterious way”; to trust that we don’t have to suffer alone. Amen.