

Lighten the load

Genesis 12:1-4; John 3: 1-17

Rev Jean Shannon

Ballast can be a good thing – it keeps us on an even keel but when the ship is sinking, the first thing we should do is throw some things overboard.

The Lenten theme this year is *running to empty*. The underlying idea is that when we arrive on Easter morning, we will be ready to be filled. We have a few weeks to prepare. Last week we gave up innocence for wisdom and choice. We traded a rosy future for endless possibilities. Curiosity is a gift from God. Curiosity is what drove Nicodemus to seek answers.

This week, we are looking at shedding. What is some the stuff we need to throw overboard to keep moving forward. If we don't, we will surely go down with the ship.

In your darkest moments, you probably already believe this ship is sinking – especially in the middle of a sleepless night. And on the worst nights, you may think you are the ballast.

Let me read you something from Hebrews:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess... Every high priest is selected from among the people... He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.¹

This applies to Nicodemus too. He is a great priest and teacher.

This passage goes beyond 'casting the first stone'. It tells us that a) even priests aren't expected to be perfect AND they are expected to know their sins and imperfections b) that it is the very nature of this very human weaknesses that should teach us kindness for others. Many say that a good chaplain comes from someone who has been to the darkest place themselves, that they have survived brokenness. It's not about street cred – but rather the ability to NOT be appalled, or frightened, or judgemental about the dark place. It takes courage and that doesn't come necessarily from understanding but from experience.

¹ Hebrews 4:14-5:17 abbreviated – NIV

But on a bad day, experience can make people judgemental and harsh. Think of the ex-smoker who rolls their eyes and are rude to people still addicted. Have you heard woman of my age say, ‘we had jobs and families and did it without maternity leave and flexible working hours. What are they crying about?’ Now couples with kids can look down on childless couples for being selfish taking all those fabulous holidays and buying those cars. Couples without children complain of subsidising playgrounds and childcare.

Perhaps, one of the things we need to throw overboard is our sense of superiority. We need to move beyond sin and struggle and have compassion for those still wading through life’s mucky challenges.

Pauls tells the Ephesians “I pray that the eye of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know hope to which he has called you...”² I love that phrase, “Open the eyes to our hearts”.

In the middle of the night, when you are trying to count sheep or say your please-let-me-sleep prayer – two rocks may sit on your chest: the dogs of regret and worry. It’s not like you call them, they choose you. One dog may slobber stories of actions you should have taken, words you should not have said, pictures you can’t unsee that make you want to howl. The other, sits quietly on your chest with blank eyes that won’t disclose what MIGHT happen, what is unseen, what will come or become of someone you love. He gives you no answers to your ‘If’s’.

This is where the 2nd part of Paul’s sentence comes in handy, ...” in order that you may know hope to which he has called you, the riches of his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead.”

Let God call the dogs off. His steadfastness is with you all the time. To throw this stone overboard would mean turning your face God instead of staring in the eyes of the canine.

² Ephesians 1:18
Ibid 1:19-20

In these darkest moments, it is good to remember that God's mission always starts in the wilderness. Redemption comes to people in darkness. Nicodemus came under the cover of night.

And finally, that brings me to Brenè Brown's research on connection. She is a social work academic and so connection is the central focus of her work. Connection is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. It could mean connection to God, to family or to community. It doesn't matter, social workers believe, and chaplains know, relationship is central to our sense of well-being. But as she started to research connection – all she heard was stories about disconnection. It very quickly became clear there was an un-named burr in our social fabric. Something that absolutely unravelled connection.

It turned out to be shame. She defines shame as the fear of disconnection. Is there something about me, if other people know it or see it, then I won't be worthy of connection.

This is the little voice we all know that wonders, am I thin enough? Smart enough? Tall enough? Manly enough? And the thing that underpinned all of this was excruciating vulnerability. The idea that for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen, really seen.

I can't tell you how many people I met who were afraid to go into a church. They felt unworthy and worst still, were afraid to be seen – especially by God. When someone says, "oh, I won't go into a church because it would probably blow up" ...it is said as a joke but it is no joke. It tells you something about their fear.

Brown's research boiled down to some very simple truths. People who had a strong sense of love and belonging believe they're worthy of love and belonging. They believe they are worthy. The thing that keeps us out of connection is our fear that we are not worthy.

It's a simple statement but believe me, as an adult child of an alcoholic, this was earth shattering news. This would be news to any child of abusive parents, of parental loss at a young age; for those who grew up in distant unloving families; for children of some veterans; siblings of the critical ill and so on and so on ...and so many!

She finally found in her research, the difference between those that had a sense of connection or gained a sense of connection and it was – wait for it – courage. They had the courage to be imperfect. They had the compassion to be kind to themselves first and then to others...just as we said in the quote from Hebrews. They had the courage to be authentic and let go who they *thought* they should be in order to be who they were.

Think of all the baggage and expectations Nicodemus carried and still, he had the courage to seek Jesus and ask questions.

And the thing you need to do this is vulnerability. We build up those walls because we are afraid – but for deep connection, we need to let down those defences, open ourselves up – even though we might not get the response we want. We have to stop trying to control and predict and be prepared to be seen as we are.

That's when Brenè Brown had her crisis – I mean really break down. She went to see a psychologist and a spiritual director. You see as a researcher, she knew that vulnerability is the core of shame and fear and our struggle for worthiness, but it also appears to be the birthplace of joy, creativity, of belonging and of love.

Life teaches us to build defences but God teaches us that we have to be naked and vulnerable to be complete, at least with the divine. We numb our vulnerability with alcohol; addiction to work; sometimes with creating busyness; and even, volunteering – especially for important roles. We are constructing our 'worthiness'.

What we have learned is that the degree in which we can be our imperfect selves with others may be the key to belonging.

Our first reading tells us that we are never too old.³

In our 2nd reading, Nicodemus plays the role we often ascribe to clowns – the person who can ask the dumb questions so that we can hear the answers. He is a literalist, so it requires some mental agility to grasp what Jesus is saying. In a way, he had to learn to lighten up!

As we jettison ballast – we will become lighter and lighter. Throw over arrogance and hardness. Toss out worry and regret. Dismantle some defences and old ideas of

³ Gen 12:4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.

worthiness. Jerusalem is coming and we must be empty so that we float in the pit of despair and rise with our God.

God, don't let what I've done, what I've been, what I confessed and what I've overcome make me hard; let it make me as soft as a saviour on a cross.⁴ and may my tenderness ease my neighbour's way to you.⁵

⁴ Quinn G. Caldwell – 2007 UCC devotional p, 10

⁵ Mary Luti – Ibid p. 16