

I Am Willing

Introduction

“Survival is inevitable. The question is the quality of our survival.” A People’s person said that in a social justice coordinating committee meeting last month and I can’t stop thinking about it. Survival is inevitable for humanity. While none of us, individually, will be getting out of here alive, humanity is not facing Immediate extinction. While the worse-case scenarios of climate change, war, and political chaos would reshape our lives in ways we can’t even begin to imagine, most likely, humanity will endure, somehow, some way. And so, today, we are drawing on the wisdom of our community and beyond to think about the quality of our survival and the skills and practices we might need to employ to face whatever unfolds in ways that are keeping with our values and that ensures a future that is worth living.

The structure for the rest of the service is taken from a lecture by Bryan Stevenson. Stevenson is a lawyer who works for some of the most vulnerable people – including children tried as adults, people on death row. His book, *Just Mercy*, has been adapted into a movie now playing in theaters. In his lecture¹, he gives four pieces of advice, which I’ve adapted slightly to make the language less lawyer-y. Get close to people. Change narratives. Stay hopeful. Be willing to do uncomfortable things. Church leaders, including the board and the social justice coordinating committee have been working with these ideas in recent months – and some of the best ideas you’ll hear this morning are theirs. Let us begin this exploration.

Get Close to People

Reading: ‘If You Knew’ by Ellen Bass

We talk a lot about love here. We just sang to the power of the love within... and sometimes that can love for humanity or the interdependent web of all existence in the abstract... but specific love, a relationship, is often needed to do the work of justice, to ensure an equitable survival. If you care about homelessness, get to

¹ This is the lecture that I reference throughout the sermon. “Speaker Bryan Stevenson.” American College of Trial Lawyers. Spring Meeting 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FINmQ0ImXGM>

know people experiencing homelessness, or strengthen your existing connections with people with that experience. If you care about immigration, know immigrants. And so on. Then ask these people how you can support them. If you are impacted by a particular injustice, get to know others with similar experiences and strategize together. This might seem obvious, but it is vital. Problems can't be solved from a distance. We need to know one another. We need to know each other's stories. We need to know who we're fighting for – and love who we're fighting for when we take on the big systems that keep us all from being free.

And this closeness is best when it is mutual. When we show up as our whole selves to be in relationship with others. So many of us here are in helping professions, which means so many of us have been trained to see helping relationships as one-sided. There is the helper, who perhaps doesn't bring their whole self into the relationship, and the person receiving help, who is vulnerable... and while that is necessary in some cases – I really don't want my therapist to tell me about her problems – that dynamic can thwart our efforts. Often, doing the work of love in the world requires mutuality.

Some of us have been learning about this in the Racial Healing Circles that have been happening in the Kalamazoo community recently. In these small circles, groups of 15-20 people of all races talk about how race and racism have impacted their lives... and in the first circles, only the people of color would talk to the whole group. Perhaps white people were afraid of saying the wrong thing. Perhaps white people recognized the reality that people of color generally have harder stories to tell and didn't want to take up time... I trust that the intentions were good, but the impact wasn't. The people of color who were talking said it felt like they were performing for the white people. It felt like a lack of mutuality. It felt like distrust... and so the facilitators of these circles and others are working to change those dynamics, so everyone is willing to bring their stories to share, so everyone can get close to one another, as that is how relationships happen and in relationships, in closeness, we find strength and courage.

Now I am going to invite you into silence. If you like, I want you to ponder your relationships. Are there people you should get closer to? Are there new relationships you'd like to foster?

Change Narratives

Activity Awareness Test from 'Inside Our Minds: Hidden Biases'

Now, this is kind of a fun way to point out that our brains have deep patterns in them, things that can be hard to overcome. This small one doesn't really matter. Bryan Stevenson encourages us to change our narratives because the stories we tell shape our realities.

Tomorrow, we celebrate Martin Luther King Day... and the stories we tell about that day matter. The dominant story is often one about how good and kind Dr. King was – and about triumph, only triumph. In his lecture, Stevenson says, "It's great that we honor the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, but I worry that we've gotten too celebratory when we talk about that period of American history. I hear people talking about the Civil Rights Movement and sometimes it starts to sound like a three day carnival: on day one Rosa Parks didn't give up her seat on a bus, on day two Dr. King led a march on Washington, and on day three we changed all the laws and racial bias was over." We know that is not the story of race in this country. We know the story is more complicated, that most stories are always more complicated...

The stories we tell matter – and it is important to pay close attention to the stories we tell and the stories that we tell ourselves. Listen closely any time anyone, including yourself, says, "those people." Whether it's labeling all Mexicans as our current president did as he ran for office or talking about "those Republicans" as one homogeneous group, which is more common in many of the circles in which we travel. Any time someone says, 'those people', get skeptical. They are creating a hierarchy of human value. And here, we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people. A hierarchy of human value is against our religion.

How do we change the narratives we carry? We start by noticing them. What have you been taught, either explicitly or implicitly about some group of "those people?" Who is safe or worthy or deserving of care and second chances and who isn't? Where does the information that shaped your story come from? Is it true? How do you complicate the narrative to tell a true story? You name it. You learn other stories. You talk to people you trust about what you are learning. We all need partners for this work, know that I am here for you, if I can be helpful.

Stay Hopeful

Bryan Stevenson says that hope is the enemy of injustice. Hope is what motivates us to stay in the complexities of the world until we find our next right step. Here, we are committed to the inherent worth of all, which, in part, means that no one is beyond redemption. "Each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done." That is a powerful idea.

Hope is practiced in many ways. In these days, I am clinging to a hope rooted in the present and uncertain about the future. We don't know how the moral arc of the universe will bend over time and we—and the world—cannot afford to be complacent. One of my favorite ways of thinking about hope comes from Vaclav Havel, a poet and leader of the peaceful transition from communism to democracy in the Czech Republic. He writes that hope is an orientation of the spirit; "it's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

Another of my teachers about hope is the writer Rebecca Solnit. "Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes—you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think all will be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It's the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand."²

This sort of hope, a hope without certainty, a hope that recognizes both the potential and the limits of human agency is the hope I have right now. I know not everything will work out, but I am hopeful that my actions, that our actions will impact the quality of our survival. That hope, not any certainty about everything working out, but a willingness to do what I am capable of, is what fuels me now.

² Solnit, Rebecca. *Hope in the Dark*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016. page xiv

Be Willing to Do Uncomfortable Things

Reading: from *The Gentrification of the Mind* by Sarah Schulman

“I wish I could tell you,” Bryan Stevenson says, “we could be guardians of justice and never do things that are inconvenient or uncomfortable, but it doesn’t work like that... I’ve looked for examples where oppression was overcome where justice prevailed where equality triumphed where no one had to do anything inconvenient and uncomfortable. It only happens when good people make difficult decisions.” Be willing to do uncomfortable things. This does not mean only do uncomfortable things or not to do the things that bring comfort to ourselves and others. That is all important... and, to do the work of justice, to be a beloved community that embraces and serves our diverse world, we need to be willing to do uncomfortable things. For each of us, this willingness is different.

I will tell you some of the ways I am working to be uncomfortable for justice.

I am learning to follow. There are a few people in our community whose vision I trust, who I say yes to every time they ask me to do something. One of those people is Dr. Charlae Davis, the executive director of ISAAC, the congregation-based community organizing group we are a part of – and who will be preaching here the first Sunday in February. I trust her vision and I show up and do what she asks me to do. Last year at this time, that meant I followed her directions and applied to be on the Kalamazoo Foundation for Excellence board. I was appointed and now I meet with city leaders to help figure out how to make our city better... and sometimes it means taping up yard signs or joining a practice circle for white people seeking to undo the harm racism has created in our bodies and our relationships. I am often asked to lead, so much of my ministerial training was about claiming my own authority and vision, especially as a younger woman. Following can feel uncomfortable. For you, the uncomfortable, necessary thing might be claiming your leadership, stating your vision, and hoping others follow. We all have our own areas of discomfort to lean into to do the work of justice.

I also try to practice productive discomfort personally, especially in my parenting. I have internalized too much of upper middle class white parenting culture, narratives that instruct me to gather up as many resources and as much comfort as I can for my children. Enrollment in a good school or extracurricular enrichment

or safe neighborhoods should be hoarded for my children. I am trying—and sometimes failing—to lean into discomfort here and change that narrative.

Last summer, my four year old came home from preschool singing James Brown's "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud." My child is white; his teachers and almost all his classmates are people of color. And I had feelings. Weird feelings. Uncomfortable feelings I'm not proud of. It felt wrong that my white kid was singing this song. Why was he being taught that? Part of me could understand intellectually that his wonderful teacher was using this song to help with positive identity formation for the black children in the class, but there was another part of me that felt like my kid was missing out. Why wasn't his experience in the middle of things? And then I took some breaths. And then I talked to a good friend. And then I realized that I was being ridiculous. My white child did not need to be catered to any more than he already was. It was probably good for him to learn that song, probably good for him to notice that not everything is for him. Having all the kids in the class feel proud of who they are mattered more than my weird uncomfortable feelings. I say often that we believe there is no such thing as other people's children – and living as if that is true sometimes means we have to sit in discomfort, recognize our reactions to things are part of a narrative that needs to be changed, and get close to people and let them get close to us.

And so may we get close to people. Change narratives. Stay hopeful. And be willing to do uncomfortable things.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.