
The Beauty of a Stubbed Toe

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A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton
Ash Wednesday 12:15 p.m.
Isaiah 58:1-12

I had not been terribly happy in recent weeks. The glow from my first assignment at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had begun to fade. I had signed on with the Disaster Preparedness Branch with wide-eyed enthusiasm and excitement. Stories of erupting volcanoes, violent earthquakes, and hurricane response during my interview had captured my imagination. I was going to be with an elite team, saving the world, disaster by disaster. It would be hard, it would be challenging, it would make the world better, and it would be glamorous.

Well, I had arrived and yes, I was part of an elite team. But I hadn't fully appreciated the culture I was signing up for. My first clue should have been my office. Prior to my arrival it had served as the branch's storage closet. They had managed to move out most of the boxes to jam a desk in, but if I leaned back too far in my chair, there was a real danger of a head injury from the wall. If I listed too far to the right, a stack of the remaining boxes was likely to tumble down and crush me, and to the left lurked a menacing file cabinet.

But, it was fine. I assumed this because I was going to be in the field so often. Helping the epidemiologists save the world.

It became clear though that I had mistaken the mission of the branch, with my actual job duties. It turns out the program I had been hired through was a great way to get a pretty cheap employee. There was hardly a branch in the organization that didn't want one of these new fangled presidential management interns. We thought we were the rising stars, they thought we were cheap help.

While the doctors were jetting off to the disaster zones, I was in charge of the plane reservations. When they were analyzing data and presenting papers. I was running the copy machine. I finally clued in when a bunch of the guys in the division looked at me quizzically in the fall. One asked, "Hasn't school started up again? I thought all the summer interns were gone," He had no idea I was a permanent employee."

Well, I am not one to let grass grow under my feet if I have made a mistake. So, I assumed the next step for me was to get out of Dodge, leave environmental health and find a different position. In a place as large as CDC, there were plenty of options. So, I heard about a job in policy over in the infectious disease center and went for an interview. It went well and I felt encouraged.

Then I waited for the phone to ring. It did. My current deputy division director asked me to step into his office. The formerly gentle, friendly man, who had never done anything but smile at me, was flushed red and looked furious. He asked me to sit. Then through clenched teeth, he said

"Sometimes the way we learn we have crossed the line is that we stub our toe. You have stubbed yours. You have stubbed it badly."

He went on to tell me that if I had been unhappy, I should have come to him. That if I wanted to work in policy, they would much rather I do it in that center, not infectious disease. I had brought embarrassment down on my branch as the phone call about my unhappiness had wound its way from one office of the director to another, down the chain of command to my deputy division director, who had no idea I was even mildly unhappy.

I thought I was doing all the right things, but had failed to pay any attention to the context I was in. I was living within a community. A community with a whole set of unwritten rules I had been oblivious too. Sometimes the way we learn we have crossed the line, is we stub our toe.

Isaiah would have made a great deputy division director. He has been sitting back watching a community that he deeply cares for. He knows they are trying. He assumes their good intentions. But he also knows they are stubbing their toes. They have somehow missed the purpose of their actions.

If they are fasting, while still oppressing their workers, or quarreling and fighting, they should not expect a response to their petitions. They have crossed the line and stubbed their toes. Stubbed them badly.

But the good news for each of us, is that Lent is ready made for those of us who are prone to cross the line. And we all stub our toes. It is a season that acknowledges our real limitations, our real mortality, and still leads us towards redemption. It is in fact the awareness of our limits that most invites us to fully embrace the promises of God.

The beauty of the prophet's call is that it is steeped in love. We are reminded that while we are missing the mark, God is still faithful. If we are willing to share our bread with the hungry, bring the homeless and poor into our homes, cover the naked, and engage in the nitty gritty intimacy of community, there is a wonderful promise.

"Light will break forth like the dawn, healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard."

But we have to get out of the way of ourselves sometimes. We need to step back and survey the landscape and see what the big picture is. If our Lenten disciplines are working well, they are hopefully not only an exercise in self improvement. If we take on new practices, they are not just meant to benefit us as individuals. It is to strengthen us so we are then more available.

When we give up things that are harming us or we are overly attached to, this is not just an individual exercise. Ultimately the awareness that is raised in our intentional self-deprivation is that our attachment to those things has shifted our gaze in the wrong direction. We have become oblivious to our broader community--our families, friends, teachers, and neighborhoods. We have had more sore toes than we really need to have.

To answer the invitation to observe a holy lent is a communal activity. It is a corporate expression of our tendency to forget our limits and mistake ourselves for God. To resign from the role of functioning as our own savior is more difficult than we imagine.

We need to be reminded that we are dust and that to dust we shall return. Not to be humiliated, but to move our souls towards humility. It is when get out of the way that we can yield to the Lord. It is the same lord who promises to "guide us continually, and satisfy our needs in parched places, and make our bones strong. It is the God who promises to make us a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters, never fail.

I continue to be grateful for my supervisor who called me on the carpet. He mentored me out of the branch where I was unhappy and helped me find a wonderful career path for the ensuing decade. Most importantly, he taught me to look around and try to see the community not as a bunch of individuals, but as a whole. In the church, it's what we call the body of Christ. Amen

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