

We Belong to Each Other

One of my favorite things about being an Episcopalian is that we celebrate Easter for a full 50 days. It's this reminder that it takes time and intention to figure out how a life-changing experience becomes a way of life.

As the disciples try to figure out what resurrection living looks like, they are invited, over and over again, to recognize that they are a part of something bigger than themselves, something bigger that God is up to.

In our Acts reading, Peter is preaching when the Spirit falls on Gentiles there. His mind is blown: "I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships God and does what is right is acceptable to God." (Acts 10:35-36) Now, most of our lineages fall into the Gentile category, so it's not hard to get on board with Peter here. But that realization totally upended a lot of what Peter thought it meant to follow God.

What causes someone to trust this kind of radical reorientation to how the world works? To who God is? To open up their lives to the unknown?

Researchers have found that people who identify as having some kind of faith - from the "spiritual but not religious" to the most traditionally observant - ground their faith in an experience when they realized they are a part of something bigger than themselves. That is the connecting factor across the diverse religious spectrum.

Hopefully this is something you have experienced, too. Moments when you knew there was more than just you or your understanding. And this realization brought you to life - new life - that you didn't realize was possible. Perhaps, like the psalmist, it was through nature. Maybe it was through an intentional decision to live differently, what Jesus calls a commandment. Maybe, like in 1st John, the only way you can describe that experience is love - as overused as that word can be. But you felt the power of love, stronger than your biggest fear or deepest hurt. These experiences drive our faith. Can lead us to do things as risky and transformative as those early disciples.

The stole I am wearing holds one of those stories for me.

A couple of years ago, my mother-in-law, Margie, went to Guatemala for a language immersion program. As she was preparing for the trip, she asked what I'd like as a gift. At first I asked for a magnet, my go-to collector's item. But a couple of weeks later I went back to her: Would it be too much, I asked, to get me a stole? As most of you know my husband, Roger, and his family are Jewish, so hunting down - even recognizing - a stole was not a typical activity for her. But I knew *a lot* of clergy with Guatemalan stoles, usually procured during a mission trip. So, I had this image of Margie being able to pick one up in a market place, no problem.

A few weeks later, she sent me this email: "Okay, I have made much headway on my mission to find a stole. From visiting the three women's weaving collectives here, I found one who knew exactly what I was talking about: A weaving collective called [Yabal](#) that supports women weavers and other projects including a midwifery program. They do not have stoles in stock but they will make you one customized to the colors and design you want."

Much more than an afternoon errand! I asked for a white and gold stole I could wear on our biggest days of celebration that also included the other colors - other times - in our liturgical life.

Once Margie returned, I went over to get the stole. She handed me a brown paper package with postage on it.

"Canada?" I asked.

It turns out that the stole was not completed before the end of her stay in Guatemala. Of course they would have been happy to mail it, Margie said, but a few days before her departure, she received a note from a distant acquaintance who had heard about the stole. She loved the idea of Margie, a Jewish mother-in-law, working with local Guatemalan weavers to create a stole for her Christian priest daughter-in-law. She would be in Guatemala the following week. Could she go to the weaving collective, pick it up for us? "I'm not religious," she was sure to say, "but I would love to be a part of this journey."

I thought of the places this stole had been in order to get to me. I had this image of hands holding and then passing the stole until it ended up here, in my own hands.

This image only sharpened as I opened the package. Along with my stole, there was this sketch of the stole - designed based on the description I sent. There were pictures of Lucia Rosario, the weaver who created my stole, along with pictures of her daughters. Lucia also sent me an explanation of what the symbols and colors I chose mean to her. Now everytime I wear it, I not only think about my tradition, I remember that, for Lucia,

- Red represents the sunrise, the day, life;
- Purple is interchangeable with black and represents the night, rest, and contact with our ancestors through our dreams;
- Green represents all of nature and the mother earth that is in all these things;
- Blue represents the energy of the sky/heavens manifested in the reflection on the water.
- White represents the spiritual energy of each person that puts them in contact with God and purity;

Every time I wear this stole, I'm invited to imagine that, when Lucia wove these together, she thought about how:

- The diamonds represent our ancestors that have transcended and converted into stars, they also can represent the 4 cardinal directions in the Universe;
- The border of the stole represents small cups that the Mayas used to make offerings to God

The final item in the package was this note: "Sarah, it's a joy to participate in the process of connecting you to a special stole that weaves together stories, hopes, and dreams of yours along with those deep traditions of Guatemalans. I can't wait to hear how its meanings continue to unfold. With love, Margie"

In that moment, I realized what I originally thought of as a simple market purchase was something bigger: Something that brought together women from around the world who I would never meet, but whose stories were woven into mine. I think of and feel accountable to them whenever I put this stole on - just like I think of and feel accountable to each of you. We didn't create this connection. It was always there. We just recognized it. Lived into it - into the truth that we belong to God and to each other.

God's creation is intertwined and interdependent, and I don't think that's by accident. Jesus embodied this truth through the incarnation, his living, his dying, and his resurrection. And we continue to discover it through the Spirit's guiding in our own lives.

Like the disciples, when we follow God, we discover that we belong to each other. We are a part of something bigger. Too often this very belief that can so inspire us instead defeats us. Many of our current systems and ways of living try to deny our interconnectedness. Or we can only see this connection as something that makes life harder. Climate change, COVID safety guidelines, white supremacy, the building project - wouldn't it all be easier if we could ignore or break off that connection? Focus on what we need, what makes us feel most comfortable? In Acts, as Gentiles experience the Holy Spirit, Peter asks, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" It's a rhetorical question. It's Peter saying, "Look! See what God is doing! Who would think they can get in the way of that?" But people do. Sometimes we are those people. We hold back the water, try to show why it's not the best idea or will require too much change.

The call of Easter living is not just to recognize that we belong to God and each other, but to see this as good news. THE Good News that drives our faith. Gospel that is not hardship but resurrection, dying to the lie that we are better off on our own or with things as they are.

In my experience this relies on imagination. Imagination is not juvenile or naive, but a creative force that enlivens us with hope, newness, and possibility. It made this stole possible. Margie's imagination envisioned it as much more than a travel souvenir. It was an opportunity for transformation and right relationship.

What could this look like for us, today? Like actually today - on this Mother's Day? This is the last part of my sermon, but since I am talking about Mother's Day I want to recognize that for some people participating in this holiday in any way is too difficult. So I want to pause in case anyone would rather mute or fast forward for these final 1-2 minutes.

A day not without its pain and tenderness, Mother's Day is also a day when we celebrate our mothers - our mommas, as we would say back in Georgia. And we know mommas come in many forms. They can be the women who gave birth to us, the ones who raise us, but moms aren't limited to that. A momma is anyone who lets us know we're loved no matter what, helps us grow, holds us accountable, laughs with us, cries with us, and—let's be honest—

gets under our skin from time-to-time. Mother's Day is a day to celebrate all that mommas bring to our collective life.

Right now in our country, 283,000 women are incarcerated. 80% of these women are mothers. Over 60,000 of them have neither had a trial nor been convicted of a crime. They are incarcerated simply because they can't afford to pay bail. These women represent the fastest growing group of incarcerated people in the United States. The bail that keeps many of them in jail is around \$500.¹ This Mother's Day, many women and mothers will languish in cages, separated from their families and loved ones simply because they cannot afford bail.

In these same United States, where \$500 can make or break a family, we spent over \$26 billion dollars on Mother's Day last year.²

In the midst of this disconnect, imagination offers another way, and that way is called [Black Mama's Bail Out](#).³

Black Mama's Bail Out is an annual campaign to bail out Black Mamas and caregivers from jails and migrant detention centers across the country before Mother's Day, marking the first mass bail out action in contemporary times. The term "Mama" encompasses all Black women and femmes that self-identify as a Mama, who parent and care for their families and communities in various traditional and nontraditional ways.

When mothers languish in jail because of cash bail, we all suffer.⁴ So, too, it takes our collective effort to give as many Black mama's as possible their freedom this Mother's Day.

We live in a world that relies on our separation and a lack of imagination, but God has chosen us for something different. These 50 days, we continue to follow the call to know the risen Christ and live into the resurrection. With the faith and imagination of those earliest

¹ <https://www.aclu.org/other/facts-about-over-incarceration-women-united-states> ; <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2019women.html>

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/289496/us-mother-s-day-expenditure/>

³ <https://www.phillybailout.org/>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/28/us/prison-mothers-children.html>

believers, from all our mommas, and those unexpected people we meet along the way...who knows what we will find. May it be so. Amen.