

When idols fall

Easter 6C—May 1, 2016

[This transcript was meant for a spoken performance. It is not optimized for a reading experience.]

I am going away, and I am coming to you.

Will you pray with me? To you we call God, you are the beginning-less beginning. Stir amongst us and so that we awaken to your spirit here and now. Amen May this be so.

[Play “Purple rain” by Prince]

Instantly from the first strike of the guitar you know who is behind the music. He is—he was, as his church called him, Brother Nelson. He is Prince Rogers Nelson, simply known as Prince.

Unless we are referring to the period of 1993 to 2000, when he was known as the unpronounceable symbol. Prince regained control of his name and once again the world knew him as Prince.

Prince has been described as an artist who was “**stunning, audacious amalgam of funk, new wave, R&B, and pop, fuelled by grinningly salacious sex and the desire to shock.**”

Prince died suddenly a week ago Thursday. Nicole and I were in the office when a call came in to say that Prince had died. Of course, the first response was, “No, it can’t be. It must be one of those hoaxes about celebrity deaths when they are not really dead.”

Prince died. Quickly the office became a mini-club and we played songs that celebrated his profound gift of music.

*I never meant to cause you any sorrow
I never meant to cause you any pain
I only wanted to one time to see you laughing
I only wanted to see you
Laughing in the purple rain*

That song became an earworm. An earworm is a piece of music that constantly circulates in your head ... *purple rain, purple rain, purple rain.*

Prince and his music connected with me. 1985, at the Grammy awards show, the Trinity had gathered. The Trinity I am referring to are the artists Michael Jackson, Prince, and Cher. OK, there were others that night: Tina Turner, the Pointer Sisters, and best new artist Cyndi Lauper.

It was Michael, Prince and Cher that I was most excited to see. Each year, my kids and I would watch the award show not only to hear the music, but I also wanted to see what those three would be wearing.

Prince and Michael—how do I describe their costuming? They pushed the envelope. They were highly creative. They were most certainly non-conforming. They presented themselves as sexually ambiguous. They did not present how males had appeared.

Need I say anything about Cher's dresses? There was absolutely nothing ambiguous about Cher. Cher was also non-conforming and pushed the envelope. The little that she wore accentuated what was hidden.

I have sat in meditation following the death of Prince. The emotion that has been stirred following his death is grief. Grief, that feeling of loss that one feels after a loss and/or after a death.

Sitting with the grief, I had to ask myself, 'What was the loss? To what is the grief connected?'

Prince's music is a part of my cultural experience.

I was 28.

I was married.

I had two kids.

I was trying really, really hard to "fit in".

I was working at conforming.

Prince music, Prince's style, were in a real sense showing me a different way of being.

My grief is connected to the loss of the music not yet written.

My grief is connected to the loss of what was.

My grief is connected to the "what is?"

Sitting with the grief, my mind scans the 31 years and questions arise: "What have I given up?" followed by "What did I let go?" and deeper still, "What have I forgotten that I need to reclaim?"

What have you forgotten that you need to reclaim?

Prince was my Idol and he has fallen.

Some of you have memories of different culture idols that are gone.

If I said "John", what fallen idols come to mind? John Wayne, Kennedy, Lennon. Maybe Johnny Cash?

"To the moon, Alice!" reminds you of whom? ... Jackie Gleason.

She jokingly referred to her husband as "Fang?" ... Phyllis Diller.

Clem Kadiddlehopper, Freddie the Freeloader and Gertrude & Heathcliff ... Red Skelton.

We have all have had idols fall from one generation to the next. Their departure marks a sense of loss.

Today's Gospel reading is from the Johannine communities. Today's reading is also about loss when idols fall. This is the farewell discourse. Jesus is talking about his end.

If you have been with us all through the season of Easter, you might get a bit confused about Jesus's adieu. The storytellers have Jesus saying goodbye because the inevitable is going to happen.

Jesus was executed. The messiah was crucified. You keep hearing me talk about the warrior king. Warrior king was the expectation of the Messiah to Israel.

We don't have any writings from the actual followers of the physical, the biological Jesus. We can only imagine the shock following his death.

With death comes fear.

With death comes anxiety.

With death comes grief, deep grief,

With death comes loss.

With loss comes the experience of disconnection. "No, it can't be true," we say.

We respond, "You're kidding me, right?"

We might even say, "No, I don't believe."

A few weeks ago, we had the story of Thomas who could not believe that the experience of Jesus as Messiah was not over. Thomas could not believe resurrection. Thomas could not believe that the followers would rise up and continue.

Today's gospel begins actually with verse 23 where Judas (not Judas Iscariot) asks,

Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?

Jesus is getting called out. Jesus is talking about his death. Death was not a part of the equation for Jesus's disciples. Jesus's discourse has stirred feelings. The followers could only have been anxious and fearful and maybe really ticked off.

Jesus is going to die; that is what he is telling them. He is getting called out because the Messianic plans and expectations were to be bigger than what was.

The writings that we have are all post-mortem or after-the-fact writings. The Johannine communities are situated around Ephesus. These Christ communities are in what we call Turkey.

We know that in the late first century, there had been a dramatic shift. The adherents to Jesus as Messiah were expelled from the temple and Jewish meeting houses after the destruction of the temple.

The gatherings of the Johannine community knew all too well the feeling of persecution for their beliefs. They were under attack and under suspicion from Rome, from the reconfiguring Jews, and from their own families.

The Johannine communities, as with any of the early movements of Christ followers, were having to figure out what they needed to remember. The church had to figure out what they needed to remember.

How does one talk about the Christ experience? Jesus was dead. Death did not end the Christ. Rome might have succeeded in killing the messenger but they did not kill the message.

The early church (and you and I in the postmodern church) have to/had to wrestle with how to talk with others about beliefs ... or ... speak about how we avoid talking about our beliefs and/or our faith.

The early church (and most certainly the contemporary church) must wrestle with how to talk about being followers of the Christ in a way that does not distract from practice. In other words, John's communities are figuring out (and we need to figure out) how to walk the walk and not just talk the talk.

I said it last week. I am going to say it again. Christ is not a person. Christ is the experience. Wrestle with that over the week. Christ is not a person. Christ is the experience.

The early church committed to action. From the get-go of today's gospel reading, Jesus says, *"Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."*ⁱ

What the gospel writers are saying to the listener, to the faith community, is that action will lead to a first-hand experience of God. There is more. *"Faithful action, what we do, allows us to feel, or potentially feel not a God out there but a God within, the indwelling presence."*ⁱⁱ

This is what the church was figuring out way back then. Way back then, they must have been anxious and fearful. The ancient mid-century followers experienced loss. In the late first century, the gospel of John followers experienced loss and rejection. Loss is a conduit for grief.

The postmodern church, that's us. That is the East-End United churches, that is the denomination, that is Christianity today. It is experiencing loss and rejection. This loss has ignited grief, deep grief. Anxiety about the future continues to fuel the grief.

Hear the Gospel words again:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

What is the antidote to grief, anxiety and loss? Peace is the antidote. Peace. Not some hippy retro idea of peace; I am talking about peace that is incarnate. I am talking about peace that you feel even in your breath. This is what we need to remember. I am talking about a peace that reminds us we are created and interconnected with all that was, is, and will be. We are not alone.

I am talking about a peace that reminds us who we are, collectively and individually.

John's gospel is written to a community that needs to remember not who Jesus was, but who Christ is. The writers of John do not show us the agony of the Garden that we find in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Johannine community is shown a Jesus who is confident that he is with God.

That's the Easter story. We have one more week of Easter. What will we remember? What have we forgotten?

Over the recent past, we have experienced the loss of many artists. Artists who caused us to think, to dance, to celebrate. Michael Jackson, David Bowie and Prince are gone. There will be no more music not yet created. That is a loss.

What they personally showed me was the freedom to simply be oneself. We are on this planet for such a short time. Prince's death reminds me to be generous, to be kind, to be creative, to not bow down to oppression, to have faith in that which is greater than self and to be in awe of the bigness of life.

At the end of the chapter verse 31, Jesus ends his discourse and simply says, *"Rise, let us be on our way."*

That is the Easter message: "Rise, let us be on our way."

Rise, trust, experience, believe and dance ... because this is good news indeed.

ⁱ John 14: 23

ⁱⁱ Peter J.B. Carmen, Feasting on the Word: Year C. Volume 2.