

The Greatest Path
Matthew 22.34-40
October 29, 2017
500th Anniversary of the Reformation
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

I grew up on Julia Street in Mobile; the origin of my daughter's name. My childhood home was 1.7 miles from my grandparents' house and 1.3 miles from my aunt, uncle and cousins. All of us went to church together at the First Baptist Church of Mobile, 1.2 miles from our house, and the five cousins all went to school together, a full 2.8 miles from the house. For almost 18 years, that was pretty much my loop—1.2 to 2.8 miles from our 1.5 acre plot of earth that was life and center and home. When I tell my story, it begins right there in that circle.

Then I moved 255 miles away to Samford University and ended up staying in Birmingham for eight years, making that 255 mile drive over and over again. And during those eight years, I met and fell in love and married Nathan Lott, driving 255 miles back home for a wedding and then 255 miles back to Birmingham to set up house and begin something new. And somewhere in those eight years, home became more of a fluid concept than a specific place; home was expanding. Home meant Gulf Coast and fresh seafood and my grandmother's dressing at Thanksgiving and my mother's gumbo at Christmas but it also meant Nathan and our quirks and habits and interests. And curiously, I learned how to make my grandmother's dressing and my mother's gumbo, though never quite as good, and brought them 255 miles north of home and watched that definition expand again.

As though to test just how fluid this "home" thing could be, Nathan and I decided to move 836 miles away to Richmond, Virginia, a place still quite caught up in the Civil War and yet curiously unSouthern in the ways I knew of home. Strongly influenced by its role as a Capital and its proximity to Washington, D.C., Richmond felt big and old and new and powerful and creative when I arrived at 25-years-old. Nathan and I made our way there for more than 10 years in a city we felt like we had discovered. We started a family and bought a house and hosted our own Thanksgiving meals and our own Christmas dinners. I remember the feel of that place so keenly this time of year because it was four years ago now that we emptied our old Virginia foursquare and said goodbye to all of our dearest friends, and felt the pull of home again.

I should say that I felt the pull as I was the only one of the four of us who had ever lived on the Gulf Coast, but we'd certainly circled back together as a family over the years

for major holidays and summer visits. Together, we chose to pack up everything we owned and said goodbye to the expansive home we had created in Richmond. We traveled 1006 miles from our home in Richmond to our one-year rental house in New Orleans. That was the plan, of course, as we moved into a Carrollton double having never set foot inside it before. We would stay for one year, figure out when and how to sell our house in Richmond, and then we'd put down roots in New Orleans and make home. That's not quite how the story has gone, of course.

At every stage in my story there was a plan of what I assumed would be and then the story of what actually was. I assumed I'd go to Birmingham for college and then move on, instead I married and stayed there twice as long. I assumed we'd move to Richmond for a three year Master of Divinity degree and then back to Birmingham. Instead, we stayed in Richmond more than three times as long. Sometimes, well, more often than not, our path isn't the neat trajectory we expect it to be. And as we look back on our story, it's easy to do so with nostalgia and amnesia. Walter Brueggemann has said nostalgia and amnesia are the great temptations of memory and as dangerous in the telling of our life stories as they are to the stories of faith.¹ It's easy to look back 15 years and memorialize that time: the life in Birmingham was easy and good before kids and itemized tax returns. Those were the good years. The life in Richmond was beautiful with that old house surrounded by sugar maples and little bitty children. Those were the good years. It's tempting and easy to look backward and mark points in time as the best it ever was or the moment when everything was as it should be. If only we could get back to that.

To think of any of those places as the good years requires a heavy dose of amnesia. For example, I miss Richmond this time of year the most because it was last days with friends. And the sugar maple across the street from our house was turning a fiery yellow. When the sun hit it just right, the leaves glowed, and you would see that tree from every street-facing window in our home. The same home that we'd played whack-a-mole with the leaks. A heavy snow one year sat and sat on the roof, helping us discover all kinds of new ones. Buckling plaster beneath those beautiful, double sash windows, revealed new siding improperly installed over old siding. For nostalgia to thrive, it must first send the fairy-dust of amnesia over everything.

At my daughter's school, they make this hand gesture—like a sideways hang ten—to indicate they're connecting with something being said, a quick, non-verbal, "me, too" in the middle of a story. Does this way of looking back at life with nostalgia and

¹ Walter Brueggemann—see Columbia Theological Seminary lectures: <http://www.theologyethics.com/2016/06/04/memory-as-temptation-to-nostalgia-brueggemann-2015/>

amnesia resonate? Does the fluid, expanding sense of home resonate? Does this way of expecting one life trajectory but finding yourself on another resonate?

I want us to be tracking together at this point so that we enter the gospel story with empathy. Let's be as generous as we can with the antagonists in this narrative: there are people of faith around Jesus who want to capture the very greatest times and preserve them fiercely. Jesus won't let them get away with it. He is challenging the path of the people around him. He is grabbing their expectations and assumptions and shaking them. Have I told you about my friend Adam who took Introduction to Old Testament with the infamous professor Karen Joines who loved to begin his freshman intro classes by reading the two creation stories of Genesis and then asking his class, so which one is true and which one isn't true? Because *clearly* they can't both be true, right? Adam bemoaned, "I used to have my ducks all in a row. And he came in and started grabbing ducks and just throwing them around. I don't even know where all of my ducks are anymore!"

Start with religious tradition, add class, empire, tradition, culture, and an assault on the roots of power, and you can begin to gather where the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians of Matthew 22 are coming from. Jesus is challenging their path, their life trajectory, their sense of home, their assumptions and expectations, and he's challenging their power. In this transition, he's challenging them to look at their path with neither nostalgia nor amnesia but for the truth of identity and origin story. Follow the path all the way back to true home—all the way to the beginning. The beginning isn't that story of curse and casting out of Eden, no, the real beginning is God breathing and speaking into being, God making humankind in God's image, God delighting in that creation and calling it very good. Grab that as the very beginning of your story and your path. Hold that as the True North of the compass guiding every step on the path moving forward and you will find you are oriented not toward maintaining tradition, grasping at power, and preserving an impossible perfection, you will find you are oriented toward love.

Exhausted by the impact of Jesus' teaching and the successful assault on their assumptions and expectations, the Pharisees attempt to trap Jesus one more time by asking him to pick which one of the commandments is *most* true. They think they'll be the ones to grab all of his ducks and throw them around this time. You can't say one law is more significant than another law without saying morality is relative or scripture isn't authoritative, right? Right? But he steps beyond the trap and back to that True North. He hears their question, "What's the greatest commandment," as "What's the guiding word for our path?" And the answer is clear: love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. These words are ancient and had been

written on the hearts of the men who challenged him from the time they were little boys. These words are the sounds of home and flood the mind with images and scents and memories. He is telling them that all of the other stuff they have prioritized and chased after is not worthy of their breath—that breath given to them from the beginning of time by the very God they think they are protecting so fiercely. All of scripture and all of life hangs on this framework of love.

Do we connect with this story? The faith community has given their lives to building something that is now being deconstructed and reshaped. And the one doing much of the demolition work is telling them this isn't the end but an amazing beginning. This isn't death, it is rebirth. And that conversation is happening within their faith tradition while there is also tremendous political and economic transformation happening all around them. The world seems to be changing so fast that it may never be the same again. Does that resonate?

The late Phyllis Tickle wrote about this transformation in her 2008 book *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. The premise of her book is that we are living in a time of tremendous transformation today—the whole world is questioning authority, political structure, economic structure, and religious structure. And to protect against the twin temptations of nostalgia and amnesia, she follows the path backward, 500 years at a time. Today, we find ourselves in a time of great emergence when something is shifting and changing, and nothing will be quite the same as it was before. And on Tuesday of this week, we mark 500 years since Martin Luther released his 95 Theses; the marking point in the Great Reformation and the beginning of Protestantism. And Tickle keeps going to remind us that 500 years before that was the Great Schism—dividing the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. And 500 years before that was the age of Constantine and the far reach of Christendom. And then 500 years back to Jesus, then 500 years back to Babylonian Captivity, then 500 years back to the Davidic Dynasty.

The path of our lives and the path of the church and the path of humanity are marked with abrupt transformations that rearrange everything and leave us with questions of what is truth, who gets to define truth, and how do we orient ourselves toward that truth? How do we get our ducks in a row again? How do we make our way back home, to center, to life that is good? These shake-ups happen over and over for us individually, and they happen systematically to us as a global people, over and over again across time. Jesus speaks to us through these ancient words, a full four shake-ups ago, and reminds us to look at the beginning of the path to find our way forward. Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself. The path may not be the one you expected or

look the way you assumed, but it is the greatest one because it is the path of God's tremendous love.

Michael Anthony Howard says, "loving our neighbors as ourselves...is God's tool to remake the world. It requires us to expect to find God's image in our neighbors—and even in our enemies."² Even without Tickle's observations, we know in our bones that it feels like the whole world is trembling and in need of being remade. We know a comprehensive transformation is happening. We know some way of being (as people of faith, as global neighbors, as human beings just living our lives) is trying to emerge. Like Moses at the end of his life, maybe we will not get to see this process to its fullness.³ But the work of our lives is leading generations of others toward a new fullness and experience of life and faith and spiritual awakening. This is our work today.

Our responses may be the temptations of nostalgia and retreating to a time when all was as it should be. Or amnesia and forgetting the lessons learned along the path and clamoring for something that really never existed. Or our response to what is changing and shifting and emerging around and within is to release everything that has kept us from the greatest path—loving God, loving our neighbors, loving ourselves. We shed it and leave it behind, giving ourselves to the True North of God's tremendous love. Everything else hangs on this truth.

² <https://pacificpilgrim.com/2014/10/21/the-politics-of-love/>

³ 1st reading of the day's worship: Deuteronomy 34:1-12