

“Know each other, and be free”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Jeremiah 23:1-3, 6-15

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Recently, I was listening again to an *Invisibilia* podcast, from several years ago, about this young guy named Max Hawkins, who got fed up with his safe, circumscribed life (who isn't, right? But remember, this is pre-COVID) and decided he was going to break out of his social bubble.

He had a pretty good bubble. Lived in San Francisco. Worked for Google. Drank artisanal coffee (whatever that is). Rode his bike to work every day. Worked on creative projects. Ate kale for lunch (which, I guess, for some is a good thing...). And met up with friends at night at a bar. The problem was he did this every day. Every day, he interacted with the same kind of people, ate the same kind of food, went to the same kind of places. He felt trapped.

So Max did what any good millennial would do. He created an app that identified all the public Facebook events in San Francisco and randomly selected one for him to attend. It sent him to community center pancake breakfasts, salsa dancing, professional mixers, gun owner conventions, a gathering of anarchist revolutionaries, a gay night club, a party in an apartment with seven Russians, even something called a belly button healing workshop.

In this way, Max got to know all kinds of people he never would have met otherwise. They became friends. They talked about ideas. And, as a result, his world widened.

As I listened to Max's story, two things occurred to me. First, that podcast couldn't even be made today. It was like listening to someone describe a whole different world. Even Max's bubble sounds a heck of a lot better than our bubble right now. I don't even remember what that was like. Second, our world could avoid a lot of hurt if we were a little more like Max.

Unfortunately Pharaoh didn't have such an app. And that's where our story begins today.

We've heard the Exodus story dozens of times. We remember the baby Moses floating down the river, the enslaved Israelites, and the midwives who save them. We've seen this story lived out over and over again, throughout history—from American slavery to Nazi Germany to Maoist China. But do you remember how it all started? Did you catch the explanation in our text?

It's there, in the very first sentence: “Now a new king arose over Egypt, *who did not know Joseph.*” He didn't know Joseph, a Jewish immigrant and ex-convict who had saved Egypt from starvation, who had risen as a leader in the land, whose family had set down roots there in Egypt, as friends. He didn't know the history of the Israelites; he didn't know his own history and the part Joseph had played. He had never walked among the Israelites, never talked with them, never sat over a fire and listened to their stories, never cradled their children in his arms, never watched them bury their dead. And because he did not know them, he feared them. And fearing them, he

used them. He sapped his wealth, power, and privilege from them. He enslaved and oppressed them. He killed their children.

This was easy to do because he did not know them. He imagined threats and stereotypes. He conjured the image of something less than human, something expendable.

The result, as it always has been, was violence.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “Men often hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they do not know each other; they do not know each other because they cannot communicate; they cannot communicate because they are separated.”

Dr. King was speaking of a different time, and yet, his words are as true today as they were 60 years ago. Currently, our public schools are as segregated for African American students as they were in 1968. Our churches are segregated; our businesses are segregated; our Facebook news feeds are segregated; our lives are segregated. Racially, economically, intellectually, politically, spiritually segregated.

Though we live in the most pluralistic time in the history of humanity, though every culture and idea is at our fingertips, we are more and more isolated to silos of the like-minded and like-appearing. We are selective in our memory and history. It is 2020 and people wave Nazi banners as if WWII and the genocide of 6 million Jews never happened. They celebrate Confederate statues without any knowledge of when and why they were erected (I’ll give you a hint: look up Jim Crow). They twist Christianity to justify white supremacy, forgetting that it was supremacy that killed our savior, that executed by order of the state a brown Jewish boy.

Like Pharaoh, we do not know our history, and we do not know each other. And because we do not know each other, we fear each other. We hurt and use each other. We draw a line between us and them—and we use this line to justify, not just exploitation and subjugation, but the daily ways in which we tear each other down, make others feel less than human.

Truth is we’re going to need more than an app to breach this divide.

We are going to need the strength and leadership of oppressed communities, who—like the Israelites who never stopped growing—will persist in dreaming, living, and speaking out. And we are going to need allies, like the midwives, who listen.

We are going to need to step out of our bubbles and know each other. Spend time with each other. Live, learn, work, and worship together. Black and white, poor and rich, gay and straight, men and women, conservative and liberal, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish.

Because when we know each other, we care about each other. And when we care about each other, we stand up for each other. We stand up like Shiphrah and Puah, who could no more kill an Israelite baby than they could an Egyptian baby. Unlike Pharaoh, they knew Joseph. They knew the women and children of Israel. They had held them in their arms. They had breathed

and labored with them. They had wept over their deaths. And they had rejoiced at the first sound of life—no different from an Egyptian.

Shiphrah and Puah weren't being charitable; they were standing with their friends.

And when even that wasn't enough, God reached out to Pharaoh's daughter. There was no way she, of her own volition, was going to get to know the Israelites. So God brought an Israelite to her. God brought her Moses. God brought her this crying baby in order to compel her to face his humanity.

In the same way, God is bringing Moses into our lives. Right now, people who occupy oppressed and violent spaces are forcing the rest of us to look upon them and witness their humanity—their anger, their pain, their dreams, their stories. They are asking us to share this life, not in fear and power grasping, but in mutual abundance.

This month every year, the NAACP, an organization created for the advocacy and elevation of people of color, hand out book bags, school supplies, and a whole lot of love to about 400 children, the majority of whom are white. Now we're still trying to figure out what that looks like this year. But that is the Joseph Pharaoh should have remembered; that is the true face of the people attacked by racial slurs and bigotry.

When we take the time to know each other, to really listen and see each other, when we witness each other's humanity—even divinity, that mark of God—we begin to change history.

Do not resign yourself to separation. Even in this time of COVID, we can find creative ways to interact, to share ideas and stories, to get to know each other. Seek out people and experiences and cultures that are different. And remember that those of us who occupy privileged spaces are responsible for busting our own bubbles. It's not the job of oppressed communities to correct our ignorance or fear. It's our job.

After World War II ended the Holocaust, my father's parents chose to move into a Jewish neighborhood so that their Christian children would know Jewish children. My parents sent my sister and me to a nearly all-black school, where we learned Spanish beginning in first grade. Every day, people of faith are making choices to cross lines of race and class, gender and sexuality, ability and age, theology and ideology—lines created to benefit the powerful and all Pharaohs.

Let us join them and write a new story. Let it begin: *And a new people arose over the land, who knew Joseph. And so they were not afraid, but worked together, and were blessed by God.*

Amen.