

In a marvelous op-ed piece entitled, *It's Not About You*, New York Times columnist David Brooks presents a snap shot of the world into which today's graduates are entering. Brooks presents a rather gloomy outlook, observing that while most of us would love to return to age 22 and start adulthood all over again, we sure wouldn't do it now. He observes that the job market is wretched, the debt is ruinous and perhaps most importantly, he observes that today's graduates leave a world that is structured beyond what most of us are accustomed to encountering to enter a world that is less structured than at any recent other time. The results of this potent mix he describes thus:

"Most of them will not quickly get married buy a home and have kids, as previous generations did. Instead, they will confront amazingly diverse job markets, social landscapes and lifestyle niches. Most will spend a decade wandering from job to job and clique to clique, searching for a role."¹

Brooks's point in writing was to opine about the search for meaning. He observes that these children of the youngest children of the baby boom have been steeped in a theology that suggests that life is all about us: our commencement addresses tell us to go and do what *we* want to do, follow our bliss, as it were, seeking meaning in a belief that as long as *I* or *We* are doing what we want to be doing, we will find happiness. Brooks suggests otherwise, that quite frequently a life, indeed a good life, is made from doing what *needs* to be done rather than merely what *wants* to be done.

¹ Brooks, David. "It's Not About You" in *The New York Times*. May 31, 2011.

It's an interesting piece and I agree with him on most points. But what I couldn't get out of my mind after I read his column was this: I don't know that I can fully understand the liminality of life as he is describing it for this generation of graduates.

Let me tell you what I mean by this.

By *liminal*, I mean *threshold* times. Liminal times are those moments when we are on the threshold between what has been and what will be. It is virtually impossible to go through life without encountering a series of liminal spaces – the spaces between what has been and what will be. These are times pregnant with possibilities. At the profound level our liminal times can be when we are waiting for the birth of a child or waiting for the death of a loved one. For those waiting for gainful and meaningful employment, the space between jobs must surely seem interminable! At the level of the mundane, liminal times can be waiting for a home to sell in order to finalize a move or for those retiring, the time between announcing and finally leaving.

What I struggle to understand, though, is a threshold that seems to extend indefinitely. It is one thing to know what lies on each side of the threshold: birth, death, employment, whatever. It is another thing altogether to look out into a great unknown with absolutely no idea what will emerge. This is an alien thought to me. If your framework is one that has, well, a *framework*, this is disquieting. At least it would be for me. I finished college, went to graduate school, completed a fellowship, got a job, went back to graduate school, got another job. Yes, I know my job is in a church, but at a basic level, that is a trajectory that most of us of a certain age understand: school, career, and if you're called to it, family. I have a hard time thinking of life without this structure.

But if Brooks is right, this trajectory doesn't exist or ring true for the younger generations – and that represents a seismic shift toward liminal space, and it is a threshold that extends indefinitely.

There is something about that indefinite threshold that rattles me. Perhaps it does you?

Or perhaps you have experienced that threshold time that extends into the unknown.

That is the sort of feeling, the sort of existence that faced the early church in the opening chapter of the Acts of the Apostles: an indefinite threshold. In the time between Easter and Pentecost, those notorious fifty days, that's what the church faced: Jesus had died and risen, promised the Holy Spirit and ascended. And then there was the waiting.

And waiting. And waiting.

I guess fifty days isn't that long, but it seems a long time to wait not know what is happening. I mean, I can handle a long threshold as long as I know what is on each side of it.

On two occasions in my life, I have been given advice that was so succinct and direct that I remember it even now and use it daily. I'll give you one of them today. My friend Joan Malick is as astute an observer of human nature as I know and she gave me this simple, easy advice that most people won't follow: when you don't know what to do, gather information.

It's an easy principle: eventually, the weight of information will tell you what to do. But it does require one to trust.

That's what was going on with that early group of believers: promises were made, the liminal space extended indefinitely, and so they gathered, and waited and prayed.

What an extraordinary act of faith it is to wait and pray. Perhaps it doesn't seem so extraordinary to you, but as one who frequently has to suppress the extreme urge to *do* something, *anything*, in order to affect an outcome, it seems extraordinary to me.

There is a story that I heard a few years ago that illustrates a certain way of looking at life and faith. I don't remember the particulars, but a group of American clergy had gone to South Korea to offer the aid of American Presbyterians to the Korean Presbyterians.

(The largest Presbyterian church in the world, incidentally, is in Seoul.) As the American ministers toured hospital and school facilities, they asked their Korean counterparts,

"What can we do for you?" Each time they asked, the Korean ministers replied, "pray for us in what we are doing." This exchange went on indefinitely with the American

ministers feeling increasingly frustrated that the only response their counterparts would offer was, "pray for us." Finally, the American Presbyterians said to their hosts, "no, you don't understand, we have money we want to share. We have resources to give, what can we do for you?"

To which the Korean Presbyterians replied, "Nothing. There is nothing you can do for us. Clearly your beliefs about prayer are not the same as ours."

There is something very counterintuitive about waiting and praying. It feels like we aren't doing anything, when in fact, to wait and to pray is to engage in something extremely profound and faithful.

Prayer doesn't give structure to our liminal spaces. But what prayer does do is to allow us to claim our liminal spaces as times in which we might be productive by seeking to understand better that which we do not understand, whatever that may be.

Dr. Sang Hyun Lee makes the claim that in calling his followers, Jesus invited them to entire into a liminal time from which they might see the structures of society in a way that allowed them to see what needed to be changed. But what struck me in Dr. Lee's article was this particular claim:

“Jesus does not leave us alone in our liminal wilderness. Jesus left home and lived in the wilderness of liminality, at the edges of his society, in the space between belonging and not belonging to his society... working out of his liminal space, Jesus was radically open to his father's will and lovingly embraced especially the despised and sick people in their mutual liminality, thereby forming a new community, the household of God, as the alternative to the existing social order.”²

Perhaps that is what is most disconcerting about the concept of liminality, those times at the threshold or the edge, is the idea that out of them might be born something so entirely new and different as to be unrecognizable and therefore uncomfortable and challenging. To sit then, in the time of not knowing, and wait and pray, seems to me to as austere a measure as can be asked of us.

It leaves me with that old adage so commonplace we've all heard it, “It's the waiting I can't stand.”

And yet when we are left to wait for God to do something, maybe it's good that we're unsettled. Maybe God can do something productive with out unsettledness.

Waiting and praying is an act of faith. It is the act of declaring, “we may not know what lies in our future, but we know who lies in our future.”

² Lee, Sang Hyun. *Claiming our Liminal Spaces* in The Princeton Seminary Bulletin, Vol. XXVII, No. 3, November 2006, p194-195

God has been known to do something creative from time to time... we of course, know the rest of the story, we know what happened when the disciples of Jesus gathered and waited and prayed. Pentecost happened. The Holy Spirit came.

The claim of Pentecost is that God still does new things. Even now, even still. We'll talk more about that next week. But while we're waiting on the new things to happen, we have this model of faith: to wait and to pray.

I suspect some of us, though not all, harbor secret doubts about the efficacy of waiting and praying. To you I say this: you are my people.

You are my people because I like to see things done and fixed. But my admonition for you and for me is this: we do well not to get so busy with doing and fixing that we miss what *God* is doing and fixing. God is always working. But sometimes it does take a while to see what God is doing. The discipline of waiting and praying prepares us to see the way of God.

I may be belaboring the point, but I think that is about the hardest thing in the world to do, to sit and wait and trust. It's so much easier to do something else, anything else. And you know what else? There are times when it is time to stop sitting and waiting and praying. Sometimes it is time to get a move on. But my hunch is this: we are way better at the latter than we are at the former. And it takes some serious grounding to know when it is time to wait and pray and when it is time to move and act.

It takes some serious grounding and grounding comes with the discipline of the life of faith. It comes with worship and study. It comes with fellowship and communion. In the acts of defining the life of faith so that we know when it is time to do what, we are grounded by the faithful community with all its ebb and flow, all its rhythms and rituals.

That grounding comes by gathering at font to celebrate what God has done, and by coming to table to celebrate what God is still doing. If we were just sitting and waiting, I suppose it would be an endless threshold to stare across. But ours is active waiting: we are called to pray and to bear with one another, and to bear witness to one another so that all of our living is itself a prayer, an endless thank-offering to God whose vast mystery and grace exceed any uncertainty we can imagine.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.