



The Cathedral of St. Andrew - Honolulu

Sermon: Year A – 6th Sunday after Pentecost, July 16, 2017

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Last week Thursday, I went with Ha‘aheo to visit Waiawa --
A low security men’s prison.
She had told me about a Hawaiian spirituality group she
facilitates there,
A ministry she has done for quite some time
And I asked if she would take me with her.
I don’t know that I could explain this, other than to say
something was tugging on my heart strings, and pulling me
towards the prison and the experience.

We met in the parking lot here, and headed out into
Honolulu rush hour traffic. As we crept along, the sun
beamed in through the windshield and onto the dashboard,
And I felt as if I was baking.
My palms were already sweaty –
I had asked to come with her, yet I had no idea what to expect.
I’ve never before been to a prison,
and I was scared.
Eventually, we took the exit, and suddenly we were driving through
overgrown lushness on a dirt road.
It felt set apart entirely –
a small garden that was being grown on property
had sweet potato vines covering the dirt in between rows of otherwise neatly planted vegetables.

We made it to the guard shack and signed in.
After parking, we got out of the car and headed towards the cafeteria.
As we walked along,, my heart was pounding in my ears.
Because it is a low security place, some of the men were also walking around the property --
Distinguishable because of the red shirts, ill-fitting blue jeans, and slippers each was wearing.
They nodded or waved to us, and when I looked up to meet the gaze of one as he passed me
I saw a rainbow in the skyline behind him.
I was reminded of God’s promise to never leave Noah,
and some of my nerves were put to rest.
I had to remember Jesus’ words, that He would be in the midst of care for the prisoner.



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When we got into the cafeteria, some of the guys were already there, moving tables.
Ha'aheo started a sign in sheet, and after each of them signed in they came to us to honi first her
and then me

Pressing foreheads and noses together,
Maintaining eye contact, and inhaling –
Sharing Ha, the breath of life.

We sat, and they began their protocol. First practicing prayers and chants,
And then moving on to practice haka.
Haka was once used as a warrior training.
The men had taken off their shirts,
And many of them had big tattoos across their chests and back
They bent their knees and began to slap their chests,
The sound of skin slapping skin filling the air.
I could see the blood rushing in, the redness it caused
I could see the sweat beading on their faces and eventually dropping to the floor
I could see the passion and the release that this practice was for them.

As I sat and watched them, I was surprised.
This wasn't an aggressive act of intimidation.
It was controlled – strong, but gentle.
The mana filled the room and I felt God's spirit so close to us.

I thought about the gospel lesson for this Sunday.
I thought about the parable of the sower, and what it means.
I thought about God's abundant ways to reach out to us.
About the abundance of seed being scattered everywhere, even in places it might not grow.
God doesn't wait for our soil to be rich and ready
She reaches out to us all the time, with abundance and exuberance.

I saw the men show this abundance to one another.
Patiently teaching and encouraging those who were newer to the group, and taking care of one
another.
I felt them show it to Ha'aheo and me –
Making eye contact with both of us,
Reaching out to be connected to us.

After they were done with their practice,
They put back the tables and sat, talking with us for a while.
Two of them had recently returned from almost five years in Arizona
They expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to be in the group
And talked about some of the harshness of being far from home.
Some of them talked about how this practice grounds them –
The way a liturgy often grounds me, I thought –
Focusing their mind on the words and actions in front of them so that when they come back to their
lives they are calm.
Some of them talked about their involvement, which reminded me of the parable of the sower.

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Some of them had been in the group for a long time,
Some were new but committed,
And some weren't sure yet.
But, wherever we were that night, God was there to meet each of us on our journey.

Before leaving we stood in a circle, holding hands, and sang the Queen's Prayer.
The words took on a deeper meaning for me,
As I thought about the imprisonment of our Queen
and the imprisonment of the men around me.
Her words have always been powerful,
But when I put myself, even for a few hours that day,
in a place where all my movements needed to be recorded
And I was reminded of the very basic privilege of freedom that I have,
The words Lili'uokalani composed became richer.

"I live in sorrow, Imprisoned. You are my light. Your glory, my support. Behold not with malevolence the sins of man but forgive, and cleanse. And so, O Lord, protect us beneath Your wings. And let peace be our portion, now and forevermore"

Ha'aheo and I do not have control over which of those men might return to prison
After all, the statistics of re-offending and recidivism are staggering.
But, for two hours on Thursday evening,
We participated in God's abundance
In God's forgiveness, and peace.
In God's Presence, and light.
Allowing seeds to be sown through us.
And recognizing the majesty of a God who meets us exactly where we are.

I pray for you that you may feel God's abundant presence in your life.
And know that you are perfectly loved; now and forevermore.
Amen.