

In my sermon last week I mentioned the blog that I had received via email entitled “Experience Lent” with its seven fasting practices to consider during Lent. The first one on the list is the one that continues to touch my heart, and the website from which the blog came is actually authored by two Episcopal priests: the Rev. Laurie Brock and the Rev. Mary Koppel. I mistakenly said last week that the author was from our diocese, and these women are from Kentucky and Louisiana respectively. The first Lenten fast is this. You may remember it from last week.

“Experience voices unlike yours. Too often, we are part of the choir to which people with whom we agree are preaching. What might happen to our interior assumptions and expectations if we listened to voices NOT like ours? If we’re white, spend the Lenten season reading books by people of color or watching movies that focus on their experience. I commend *Thirteenth* and *I Am Not Your Negro* for starters. If you’re straight, read and watch art and narratives by LGBTQ people. If you’re male, read works by women and listen to their experiences. Allow yourself to be bothered, to be challenged. Explore your own prejudices. What assumptions did you have before you listened, and how have they changed?”¹

I am embracing this “experiencing voices unlike yours.” I’m trying to listen

¹ Laurie Brock, *Dirty Sexy Ministry* post, March 1, 2017, 12:48 p.m.

with more intention as I wander through my week and encounter people I know and those new to me. I had the opportunity to be part of the Town of Canton's kick off to its yearlong wellness program. Thursday night's program was entitled "Shining the Spotlight on Mental Wellness: Substance Abuse Prevention and the Opioid/Heroin Epidemic" with a resource fair of some 20+ community services and a profound keynote speaker. I hosted the Canton Churches' table and serve on the town task force that is planning these events throughout 2017.

A Farmington Valley woman named Laura Shafer spoke about her journey through alcohol addiction that led deeper into a heroin addiction. She seemingly had everything before her addiction, and has now been in recovery and sober for 24+ years. She lost her first husband who was granted custody of her first child. She sold most every possession she had to feed her addiction. She was in one program after another and finally reached her bottom that led to recovery. The conference room where our First Selectmen meet was filled to capacity. It was as if she was sharing at an AA meeting, and yet she opened herself to our community with truth and integrity and raw detail. She has now gotten her PhD and is remarried with two children and continuing to make amends for her disease. It was an honor to hear her story. From Laura I learned about courage in new ways.

I also learned more about the opioid crisis in our community and the many resources available to us for treatment, advocacy, services, and support. Addiction is a challenge beyond understanding for people of all ages, and it touches most of

our lives as we listen to the voices and stories around us.

The reading from Genesis tells us that God calls Abram to go to a place where Abram has never been before—leave your country, leave your kindred, leave your father’s house, and go to a land that God will show him. It was a call to go with a promise that God would bless Abram, so that Abram would be a blessing. God said, “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen 12:3). And Abram faithfully goes. He steps into new territory, into newness of life with the assurance of God’s promise. It’s not terribly unlike the new life that Jesus explains to Nicodemus who comes to Jesus in the night with his curiosity and openness. Jesus invites Nicodemus to let God work in his life in a new way. Just as Abram was about to discover new life, Nicodemus is invited to new life. You and I are invited to new life every day.

I read another story this week about a man named a man named Chuong Nyugen, who was one of the boat people to escape Viet Nam just before Saigon fell in 1975. Nyugen writes, “On April 29, 1975, the day before the ‘fall of Saigon,’ my parents put me, my brothers and sisters, ages 6-21, on that perilous journey into the unknown. Our overcrowded boat had no captain and no crew; my father, brothers, and many others became seamen on that weeklong trip with little food or water.... We were lucky to have even gotten on that boat. My parents had already fled North Vietnam in 1953, and were again fleeing the Cong San (Viet

Cong) and communist rule.”² Nyugen ultimately made the journey to the United States and became a U.S. citizen and Catholic priest. You may have heard this story.

Last month he made the news when he wrote our President on the day the ban for refugees and travel restrictions was signed. Nyugen wrote, “My heart and my soul were frozen. I am a refugee.... Becoming a refugee is a choice one makes when there are no other options.” Nyugen offered to relinquish his U.S. citizenship so that it could be offered to a Syrian refugee. He also shared in his letter “that he wants his superiors to relocate his life of service to one of the seven predominantly Muslim countries named in the executive order.” In an interview he said, “I receive so much. I want to give back. When you are a refugee you are nobody. America has allowed me to be somebody.”³ Nyugen offered the gift of love and life.

The voices of those unlike ours can indeed challenge and bother us. They call us to reflect on the assumptions we have before we listened, and to think about how they have changed.

This week I also had opportunities to talk with different people about the Canton High School basketball game and to read nearly every day in the *Hartford Courant* about the event. There is a lot of emotion from students, parents, administration, and others. I don’t know why certain things were chanted. It would

² www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2017/02/20.

³ Peter W. Marty, “From the Publisher,” *Christian Century*, March 4, 2017, 3.

be important to hear the whys from those who chanted. I am still listening.

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Abram was willing to set out on a journey to a place where he had never been before. As you read more about Abram, you discover that he learns and grows from the experiences he has—even from the mistakes and wrong turns he makes. He lives into the new life to which God calls him and experiences that God is with him every step. Abram still speaks to us these many years later and reveals to us the God who walks with us and blesses us, even when we make a wrong turn or make a mistake. That's good news. Abram also instills courage in us to go to a place where we've never been before or to listen to a voice unlike yours that might challenge and bother you. Where might that be for you?