



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Out of the Dust and Rubble – Two Trees
Ash Wednesday, Year B, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
February 14, 2024
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Bud and Bill are a lot alike. They were born six months apart. Both are descendants of Irish Catholics and spent their entire childhoods attending Catholic schools. Both grew up on farms. Neither went to college. Both are working men, Bud at his gas station in Oklahoma, and Bill at a radiator plant in upstate New York. Both had been divorced, and both were the fathers of three children.

Despite all the things these two men had in common, it was unlikely that Bud and Bill would ever cross paths given their geographic distance from one another. But their worlds collided three days after Easter Sunday, 1995, when Bud's 23-year old daughter, Julie Welch, was among the 168 people killed in the Oklahoma City bombing by Bill's 26-year old son, Timothy McVeigh. At that moment and in the days and years to follow, they again had something in common. Bud and Bill were two fathers, each with a gaping hole in his heart, each desperate to have it filled.

In our epistle lesson from Second Corinthians, the apostle Paul entreats the community to be reconciled to God. Why is that so important? Because there is a gaping hole in the heart of humanity. And there is a gaping hole in the heart of God.

God takes the amazing step of entering our mortality - living, breathing, laughing, and suffering in all our dust, muck, and mire. One reason God may have done it this way is it's easier to confess our sins and shortcomings to someone who has walked in our shoes.

Once we are reconciled to God, we become part of God's ministry of reconciliation. The best way we can continually fill the hole in the heart of God and the holes in our own hearts is to reconcile with one another. Not just when it's easy, but most especially when it's hard, even when it seems impossible.

For Bud Welch, just bringing his daughter Julie into the world seemed impossible. She was born six weeks premature. She survived, but Bud became extra vigilant about looking out for her. During her time in college, Bud called her every single day.

Julie discovered that she had a gift for languages, especially Spanish. She was offered a full-ride fellowship to earn a master's degree at Marquette. But she turned it down to go home to Oklahoma City, to be close to Bud and to serve the people she loved. She accepted a job as Spanish interpreter for the Social Security Administration. On the morning of April 19th, Julie had just gone toward the front of the Federal Building to meet a Spanish-speaking man and his pastor, to help the man get a Social Security card.

Bill McVeigh called his son Timmy. He loved it that Timmy helped with the kids' games at church. Timmy helped Bill by fixing the basement floor and putting in a new storm door. Bill was proud of his son for earning the Bronze Star in the first Gulf War.

Timmy became a restless wanderer when he got home and began travelling from state to state. Bill did his best to stay in touch with him. Two days after the explosion, FBI agents descended on Bill's home. He told them everything he knew about his son, gave them all of Timmy's possessions in the house, and went with them to Oklahoma City to answer more questions and to cooperate with their investigation.

Bud Welch's first instinct toward Timothy McVeigh was to want vengeance. When Timothy was moved from a local jail to a federal prison, Bud hoped a sniper would kill the man who killed his daughter. He began chain-smoking all day and near-blackout drinking all night. Bud recalled, 'I was looking for something to help, and the two things I was doing were making it worse.'

One day, he saw Bill McVeigh on television. Bill was stooped over a flower bed. As he answered the last question from the reporter, Bill turned and looked straight into the camera. Bud recognized that look instantly. He said, 'It was a pain I had been feeling. I knew that someday, I would go tell that man that I knew how he felt.'

Three years after the bombing, a nun named Sister Roz arranged for Bud and Bill to meet at Bill's home in upstate New York. Bud, wanting to put Bill at ease, said,

'I understand you have a nice garden in your backyard.' Bill's face brightened, 'Would you like to see it?' After they walked and talked for a while, Bill finally asked, 'Bud, can you cry?' Bud looked up at him, 'Yeah, Bill, I can.' Bill said, 'For more than three years, I've wanted to cry. I've had a lot to cry about. I've tried to cry. I just can't do it.'

Later, when they went inside, Bud noticed a photo of Tim from about 10 years earlier. Bud could see Bill seeming to hold his breath. Bud felt that he needed to say something, so he said, 'God, what a good-looking kid.' Bill looked up and said, 'That's Timmy's graduation photo.' And rolling down Bill's cheek was a single tear. Bud no longer had to think of what he should say. The words came rushing out. That Bill was not to blame for what his son had done. That Bud didn't hate Bill or his family. And that he didn't want Tim to be executed.

Bud later recalled his meeting with Bill, 'I felt this tremendous weight falling off my shoulders. I have never felt closer to God than in that moment.' Sister Roz, the nun who brought them together, observed, 'Bud may have thought he was ministering to Bill. But maybe Bill was ministering to Bud.'

The apostle Paul writes that salvation and reconciliation can grow from afflictions, hardships, calamities, imprisonments, and sleepless nights. These gifts somehow emerge as we endure through the muck and mire of our dusty lives. We just keep putting one foot in front of the other, trying our best to be patient, kind, truthful, and loving. And, like God, we keep taking risks and we keep reaching out.

Bud's daughter Julie would always arrive early to work at the Federal Building, so that she could snag her favorite parking spot beside the only shade tree in the lot. Three months after the explosion, Bud saw bulldozers working around the building site. He noticed the shade tree was still there and he pleaded with the authorities at a public meeting, 'It is the only thing left there that survived. All of the dead have been buried. There's nothing else living except that one tree. I want that tree saved.' That elm tree is known now as the Survivor Tree, named for the speech Bud gave that night. When Bud was asked why the tree mattered so much to him, he said, 'To me, the tree is a symbol of Julie.' It is now the centerpiece of the Oklahoma City memorial. A plaque surrounding it says, 'Our deeply rooted faith sustains us.'

A friend gave Bill a small tree a few months after Tim's execution. Bill picked a spot in the middle of his backyard and planted the tree there. He calls it 'Timmy's tree.' It is now ninety feet tall. A friend came by and suggested Bill cut it down,

since it blocks his garden from receiving sunlight. Bill said, 'Do you know what that tree is?' That flourishing maple represents his son.

Two fathers, two trees,
emerging out of the tear-soaked dust and rubble.

On this Ash Wednesday, what seeds of impossible reconciliation
has God embedded in our dust? *Amen.*