

Grace and peace my brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.

Hear the words of Robert Frost.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

Stories of my people, the Ojibwe, tell of an age when intentions will be revealed. The path we currently travel will divide and those who are non-Native to this place will choose between the two trails that result from the split. One trail appears heavily travelled and smooth but when you step on it, you can feel the shards of jagged and broken promises piercing the soles of your feet. The other trail seems untravelled. The grass is so tall that you can't see very far down it. Native people must choose if we will follow the masses or if we will turn and go back, retracing the steps of our ancestors, picking up the broken pieces of our culture and identities that were stripped from us along the way. The people who turn back and retrace our ancestors' steps will be known as the New People.

Our stories tell us that that Ojibwe and the settlers have opportunity to build a great Nation but we must do it together, working towards a common goal. A goal that benefits all of creation not just human beings, and most certainly not just one people group. The pieces that the New People collect as they retrace the steps of our ancestors will be key to building this Nation, but the journey for them will be hard and the lives of service they live will leave them carrying a heavy weight. The New People will never catch up to those who choose the trail of broken and scorched things. People who travel this beaten path move too quickly. They are missing the tools they need to participate in healthy co-creation but the New People have no way to catch them and teach them what was lost. So, only those who walk the grassy trail will be equipped to find healing and peace. Our stories ask us, Which trail will you walk? And will we be one of the New People or not?

The story of Nehemiah reminds me of this teaching. His people were scattered. Many were living in captivity in lands far from their traditional home. Enough time had passed that a new generation had come into their communities. A generation of children that only knew stories of their homeland. A generation who knew only the life of exile. But, there was a group who had returned home. This remnant of the original community had a hard time. Others had taken over during exile so when they returned, they were marginalized in their own homelands. They cleaved to the teachings of their people. They worshipped God in the way of their ancestors.

And they experienced the crushing weight of oppression that marginalization brings. Yet, they were the hope for those who remained in captivity. This remnant was a reminder that God is forever faithful and that liberation for all would one day indeed come.

It was under these circumstances that Nehemiah, a captive, received news of the remnant and the destruction of Jerusalem. The beaten trail of scorched and broken things had stopped on the remnant's door. The walls of their city were burning. The lands of their ancestors were lying in ruins. It was during this time that God whispered to Nehemiah, "be one of the New People. Retrace the trail you traveled to get here. Rebuild the city of your ancestors. Go so that they can see that I, the God of hope and liberation, cannot be defeated." And Nehemiah went.

Charged by God to be a ministry that rebuilds that which is broken, members of Together Here Ministries have spent the past 3 years laying ground work to build the bridges reconciliation brings. During this time, I have traveled throughout our synod, teaching about this land. In these times of shared space, I have been gifted stories from those who came to listen and learn. And from these stories, I have affirmed a very real truth. We all love this land. Indigenous and settler alike, this is our home. This is where we have built lives, where we have reared children, and where we have buried our dead. We describe this space as God's Country. And our connection to the land and water that make northeastern Minnesota runs deep.

But equally deep run the divisions that separate us. We disagree on how to live well on this land. We disagree about what love of land looks like. We disagree about who deserves what and who should get to do what and when they should get to do it. And we split ourselves up based on our disagreements. Each of us holds firmly to our own understandings, making it so we're incapable of seeing the full picture that God has laid in front of us.

Yet, despite all our disagreements, we agree on one very important thing: our disagreements are tearing this land apart at the seams. Rallies have taken to the streets. Social media is filled with slogans. Some of our communities are literally on fire. And many of us are standing stunned, grasping buckets full of shattered illusions. We are coming to realize that it's possible that there have been many things that we simply did not see. We agree that the land we love needs rebuilding. But where do we start? How do we even begin? Maybe, the answers we seek can be found by going backward instead of forward, from engaging in a journey of reconnection.

When Jesus' path intersects that of the man born blind, he gathers those whom he called, then using the soil of the earth, that from which all was originally formed, he combines it with the water of life - his very saliva. With water and earth, he equips the blind man to see. This story

is filled with imagery of reconnection - reconnection to the earth, reconnection to living water, reconnection to each other, reconnection to God.

Members of Together Here Ministries hold fast to the truth that the way things are is not the way things have to be. We commit to being God's hands and feet in bridge building and healing work, training up disciples who are equipped to be sent into the world carrying the transformational medicine of reconciliation that God introduced through Jesus, the Messiah. We evangelize to the world by acting as a conduit between the church and our communities, connecting God's creation in both, always working to develop space where authentic healing can occur. Yet, we accept that achieving true reconciliation is work beyond human control. Injustice and struggle for power have resulted in wounds that need the balm that only God can give if we are to ever fully heal. True reconciliation requires us to not just see the brokenness of the world and strive to fix it, but to also feel the pain of the world's brokenness and sit silently, humbly, lovingly in its presence because we, as Christ's disciples, accept that it's in this space, we meet the healing and reconciling power of God.

Each of us has been called through the living waters of our baptism to participate in God's reconciling work. Each of us has received the invitation sent by God to go into our communities and see. Each of us is asked to be the New People, retracing the trail, gathering up that which was lost, and using these reclaimed tools to build a great Nation rooted in Christ - God's kingdom here on earth.

Two roads diverged in a wood...

Like Nehemiah and like the man born blind, we are told to go, to see and to rebuild that which the beaten path has broken. Amen