

## **Living in the Space Between: Fear and Wisdom**

### **2 Corinthians 5:17-21**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn  
March 30, 2025

Have you ever had what was a life-changing event for you? I don't mean the kind of casual use of that expression - like when we might eat an exceptionally good piece of cake and say "oh, my gosh, that cake is life-changing!" I'm talking about a serious life-changing event. Something that has happened to you, and you know you will never be the same because of it. One of those events that becomes a marked point on the timeline of our lives - a point we refer to when we say that was then, this is now.

Some of these events change our lives in a good way. Meeting the person you end up married to for 60 years, for example. Or working with a teacher or mentor who inspires you so much that you choose to follow in their footsteps. Certainly having a baby falls in this category as might the experience of living overseas.

Yet, inevitably, some life-changing experiences impact your life in a deeply painful way. The death of a spouse or beloved family member. The end of a marriage. A frightening medical diagnosis. A terrible auto accident.

The question is when one of these life-changing events happens to you, how will you respond? Your immediate response might be elation or despair or maybe wonder or shock. Yet, I contend that whether what has changed in your life is amazing or terrible, at some point your response will also be fear, which leads us to the next pairing in our "Living in the Space Between" sermon series, fear and wisdom.

Ron Heifetz of the Harvard Kennedy School is an expert on change, and he wrote something that has been particularly helpful to me in my ministry over the last few years. He says, we talk a lot about how people fear change, but it's really not change that they fear. It's loss. Whether the event or events that change your life are life-giving or heart-breaking, what makes them scary is not the change itself, it's what we might lose in the process. Even those wonderful occasions like meeting the love of your life or having a baby elicit fear on some level because as soon as you give your heart, you risk it being broken. You fear something terrible happening to your beloved. Worse yet, you know that at some point you will lose your person either through their death or your own.

Of course, you are afraid! And even more so when the loss has already happened. How will you go on without your spouse? Can you learn to live with this illness or injury?

That fear can be debilitating - leading us to paralysis, overprotection, or withdrawal, but it doesn't have to be. Rabbi Steve Leder, author and biblical scholar, suggests that it is in these life-changing moments, moments when we must face the reality of loss, that we have the opportunity to move, sometimes in baby steps, from fear to wisdom. If we are open to it, there is deeper knowledge we can gain about how precious life is, how beautiful the interdependence of creation is, how much of what is meaningful in our lives comes from our relationships with each other. Disruption, Leder says, is the only thing that teaches us anything.

Last night, we had the last worship service at Green Wood as well as a farewell dinner and program after. As I was preparing what I was going to say to the Green Wood worshippers, I realized what a beautiful example they are of living in this space between fear and wisdom.

When we voted as a congregation to sell Green Wood, there was tremendous grief among the people who call Green Wood home - and understandably so. And, of course with grief also comes anger - and there was a fair bit of that, as well. Plus, there was anxiety. If there was no building called Green Wood to house the people who worship there, what would there be? The mood there for a while was dismal and, as always happens when there is a crisis, rumors flew across the church as anxiety built.

Eventually, the time came when I asked for people among the Green Wood worshippers to form a task force to begin planning what would happen once the building was sold. Though still struggling with grief, a group of folks volunteered to do this work, and we all owe them a tremendous debt. They began to imagine a new future. They wrestled with questions like where would this community of people worship? What would the worship service be like? How would we celebrate this place and its special history?

It was hard at first as any one member of the Green Wood task force would tell you. Everyone came to the process with different ideas, different priorities, and different wants and needs. But slowly, the group began to coalesce. They surveyed the Green Wood congregation, they worked through their differences, and they began to dream. They envisioned a new contemporary worship service that with a strong music leader and a praise band. A service that would truly feel welcoming to everyone and, hopefully, appeal to a younger generation of people. Folks toured the downtown building to decide where the service would meet, and eventually they chose the room formerly known as The Chapel. Robert Langdon joined the Chapel Redesign Team to represent this group's wishes for their new worship space. Anne Cox volunteered her time as an architect to listen to them and to other focus groups and then design a space that would be contemporary, light, and flexible. Many of us began to imagine having all the windows open with music pouring out into the street and people walking by saying, "Hey, what's going on in there?"

Now, the new Green Wood Sanctuary is about to open, and we will have the first contemporary worship service there in two weeks. It is a beautiful new worship space that will be used not just for our contemporary worship service but for all kinds of other purposes, as well. So, why am I telling you this story? In part, because it is such a wonderful example of finding that space between fear and wisdom. One that we all can learn from as we continue to live in "unprecedented times". Fear takes a long time to resolve, grief even longer. Yet, the process moves forward best when we can seek some deeper understanding of what we feel, what we need, and where we would like to go. This is the gift of wisdom.

There is another reason I share this story about the Green Wood congregation with you, too. With this change in the life of our church, God is creating something new. Not just a new space or a new worship service, a new First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor.

From what I can tell, there has always been tension between the Green Wood folks and the downtown folks since the former Glacier Way United Methodist Church became a part of this church in 1994. That tension has sometimes built up to an uncomfortable pitch and sometimes

settled down into a dull hum. The decision to sell the Green Wood property brought it to new heights.

At this point, some two years later, the folks who will come here on April 12 to begin worshiping in this building have done a lot of work to prepare themselves for this change. Some are further along than others, to be sure, but there is a core group who are ready for God to use them in the making of a new creation. It is incumbent upon those who call this building their church home to prepare for that, as well.

How do we do that? First of all, we take some time to remember one of the most life-changing events in our own lives. To unearth some of the fear or loss or anxiety or grief we felt at the time so we can greet those coming to worship here on April 12 with sincere empathy and with hearts open with welcome.

Secondly, we remember the words of our scripture reading for today: When a person is in Christ, we no longer live for ourselves but for Christ and for others. Perhaps another way of thinking about that is that in Christ, we no longer focus just on ourselves but on the whole community. Also, we no longer look at others only as humans but as children of God. And we no longer hold onto the sins of others. We let go of grudges and anger and truly clean the slate for a new beginning.

All of this prepares us for the great honor God gives us of being God's ambassadors in the world through the ministry of reconciliation. Like an ambassador to another country represents the United States, we represent Jesus Christ who taught us to reconcile our differences with God, with each other, and within ourselves. As ambassadors for God, we become the goodness of God in human form. We become the peace of God in human form. We embody the wisdom and the welcome of God.

And that is what I hope we will offer not just the folks who will soon be coming here from Green Wood but anyone who comes through our door. It is easy to hold back out of fear and not fully welcome others, especially when you know that there is a history of tension, loss, or grief. Fear can make us feel small, shy, uncomfortable, even kind of paralyzed. Wisdom, on the other hand, is something we gain as we live and may not fully know until we are old and wizened. Yet, somewhere in the space between them is where we live as new creations and as ambassadors of Christ.

May it be so. Amen.