

Tearing Down and Building Up: An Open Letter to Young People

Preached by the Rev. Thomas M. Kryder-Reid at the 10:15 a.m. Holy Eucharist and Rite 13 "Crossover" ceremony at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Readings: Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; Psalm 139:1, 8-9, 12-15, 22-23; I Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22.

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 16, 2011

Dear Katherine, Emma, Kayla, Abbey Claire, Bradley, and Teddy—

Instead of the usual sermon today, I've written this letter—for you.

Today is Rite 13 "Crossover" Sunday. It's your day in church. At age thirteen, you're on your way from childhood to adulthood. Soon we'll see that journey illustrated as you walk across the church aisle—as you symbolically cross over from the concern of parents to the confidence of peers. I hope you know you'll have our prayers and love and support all the way, through the many decisions you'll have to face as your days and years increase.

Yes, I remember well what we talked about when I met with you last Sunday. It was this very topic: Decisions. The kinds of decisions that confront us at different stages of life. And the courage, the guts it takes to make the hard ones.

I was interested especially when we talked about the novel *The Help* [Kathryn Stockett, Amy Einhorn Books/G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2009], now also a movie. Remember the decisions some of the characters in that story have to wrestle with? Skeeter, for starters: Recent college grad, aspiring young journalist, how she puts at risk long-standing friendships when she decides she'll try to write a book about what life is really like for black housekeepers working in homes of white families in the segregated South of the early nineteen sixties. But then, talk about courage, guts: How about those housekeepers themselves? For those maids to let Skeeter interview them—for them to tell the truth to her or any white person—means endangering not only their livelihood, but their lives. I stand in awe of those women—the barriers had to break through, the inner fear they had to break down, in order to open up.

That conversation we had last Sunday was still resonating in my mind the next day. And I'll tell you, it only added to the impact of what I witnessed Monday morning and have kept watching this whole past week—which is the image I want to reflect on for you in this letter.

Have you noticed what's been going on across the street this whole past week? You can see it today: The demolition of the abandoned Winona Hospital—a literal breaking through and breaking down.

The hospital itself closed seven years ago. Since then, nobody's wanted to buy the building—it's just not usable anymore. It's fallen into disrepair and decay. Vandals have broken in and trashed the place, stripped it of anything even minimally valuable. For too long, that dilapidated building has needed to be torn down so that things new and good can be built up in its place.

Now at last there's money available to tear it down, and finally there's a plan for the property that pretty much everybody agrees with. The plan calls for a mix of new homes, new businesses, and an interactive outdoor park run by the Children's Museum. But nothing of this plan can even begin to take shape until the mess is cleared out.

So here's what happened Monday morning. Mayor Ballard wanted to make a public event of finally getting this demolition underway (he is, after all, running for reelection). So he invited several local

officials, including yours truly, to say a few words. Then, after we spoke in front of TV cameras and a small crowd, what a scene! This monstrous T-Rex-like machine with long neck and huge pincer lurches into action. It goes for the big Winona sign and rips out the giant *W*. Then it starts chomping away at the building itself. Huge chunks of brick and mortar plunge onto the entrance canopy and the driveway below—*bam! bam!* All of us watch in awe as this tyrannosaurus of tear-down does its work so that things new and good can be built up.

Here's what I've realized since then: The journey to adulthood, and through adulthood—your journey and ours—sometimes can look and feel a lot like that scene. Especially the hard decisions we have to make can feel like demolition when we make them. When we talked last Sunday, you mentioned a few of the challenges you face: resisting drugs and alcohol, standing up to peer pressure, knowing whom to trust. I bet some of you have already experienced moments when saying no to things bad and destructive, and trying to stand firm for what's good, seems like that T-Rex machine pulling away at the maybe not-so-giant *W* that's your own will power.

Jesus knew from his own human experience the decisions we all have to face. He was also under no illusions about the games we play trying to avoid them. You heard him in the gospel just now. The Pharisees pose a dilemma about paying taxes. They try to trap Jesus in his talk, get him to incriminate himself by seeming to favor God over emperor or emperor over God. But he's got their number. He hands their question back to them—along with some clever advice for answering it themselves: Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, he says; give to God what belongs to God. What he implies is that they can keep their loyalties straight if they work together and seek God's help—that is, if they *want* God's help.

Which brings me to Jesus' promise for us all: We have God's help—if we want it. And we have it especially as we work together. God delights when we work together, as we strengthen one another, build one another up, just as God is ever eager to strengthen and build us up.

So let me leave you with another image. This one is about why we can entrust ourselves to God through all of life's tearing down and building up. You probably recognize the name C. S. Lewis, author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He tells this little parable in his book *Mere Christianity* [IV, 10].

Imagine yourself as a living house [Lewis writes]. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps... He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and... you knew that those jobs needed doing... But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense... throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace... and [He] intends to come and live in it Himself.

Katherine, Emma, Kayla, Abbey Claire, Bradley, and Teddy—God is ever eager to build *you* into God's own palace.

Sincerely yours,

Tom Kryder-Reid

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