



BREAKING OPEN SERIES

BLUES CHRISTMAS

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I was all excited to talk about this time of year in Dallas finally, finally with an earth as hard as iron and chilled to the roots with everything slowing down somehow and how fast you want to go didn't matter. How could I know we'd need sunscreen and air conditioning this weekend? But all that doesn't change that this is the Fourth Sunday of Advent. It's meant to be the one that is the darkest as the Christian traditions borrowed the tradition of the solstice at this time, the darkest day of the year. In a few days, we all, though, will hold the new light, the light of love that breaks into the world. So it's good to wonder about this time how that light gets in, right?

We know many of us here, I think it's that kind of congregation, what Leonard Cohen would say now, "There's a crack, a crack in series." No, just kidding, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in. And that's how Deanna gets out. No, I'm kidding. I struggle a little this time of year with how much to say on this day when we talk about the truth that for this season, those who celebrate these holidays, and especially even for those who really don't, who don't get down for these holidays, that this time of year is really hard. It can be really, really hard. With every passing year, more loss of what we thought we had, what we thought we would always have maybe and what we loved, slips from our lives. And a time of celebration of togetherness and family of connectedness like this season makes sometimes that loss feel even deeper, more painful.

In Sonny's Blues, James Baldwin writes in this short story about a young man, Sonny, who struggles first with the loss of his parents and being raised by other family members, followed by drug addiction, then recovery, then navigating family relationships, then going to war and all that that holds, and then making a way in this world as a jazz musician, which might be the hardest and deepest cut of all. But it is a Christmas story because the light finds a way, even when it seems like it can't or won't, even when so much of life has been dimmed by struggle and by pain.

I mean who here has been touched, whose life here has been troubled by an addiction in your family system of some kind? What about depression? Keep your hands up, we're just doing this. Anxiety in your life, grief? All right, so we're in the right room, that's good. Because this kind of living death, this undisclosable struggle that so many face or that we feel is undisclosable often alone has cracked, cracked many of us. And here we are raising our hands.

James Alison is a Catholic theologian who recently recanted his own ordination, more on that, but he has a theology or a theory about human faith and he calls it the theology of the cracked heart. His point is that a truly broken heart, one that simply doesn't work, can't be mended, ends our lives. But a cracked heart and injured heart can be repaired, can work maybe under half steam or just needs some help to keep going, but it keeps going. A cracked heart gets bad news and makes the next appointments it needs to make, a cracked heart misses the people who misunderstand them, a cracked heart thinks of people gone too soon before we could mend our love with them. A cracked heart can't understand why the people they love can't love them back for who they are and on and on in our lives. And the story is older than us maybe, older than speech maybe, only in the rumblings of the rhythm of our human ancestors we still feel in us today.

In our reading, we hear what the blues are for Sonny, how the music is only music when it passes through a person, when the contents of the voids swirl in dead dullness until they are plucked or beaten or sung into being to hear first, then to recognize as exactly what we know too where we have also been, how we have also felt, how dark and dreary are the pathways we've trod, and how in God's name a person we never met before in our lives understands where we have been to. That knowledge, that intimacy without ever meeting a song that seems to be woven out from our own life, from our own struggles, that community is the blues.

Baldwin says this in the story about the bass player named Creole, who is the band leader on stage with Sonny, he says this about the rest of the quartet. Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness and death in order to find new ways to make us listen for while the tale of how we suffer and how we are delighted and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell. It's the only light we've got in all this darkness.

I had a friend in Hawaii who I'll call Matthew. I met him when he was getting out of jail and he was trying to recover from heroin addiction. He was sick every day, every day, but just enough of him knew that the sickness of trying to get better was better than the sickness he had known for years and his life changed, guys. He healed relationships that were broken. He saved and was able to afford college. And I remember this week one summer when we hung out in Washington State where my family lives, he was about to start a road trip to Tennessee where he was going to college. So he stayed with me at my parents' house and the only room we really had was this guestroom that had two twin beds. So it was like we were in a dorm room or we were kids again together in these little beds as we waited for his car to arrive to the Seattle port from Hawaii by ship. When he was ready, he went off to school where he stayed clean and finished his degree.

I can't tell you how proud his mom was, how beaming his dad was, over the moon his sister was. A life of ruin and of seamless anger, seeming anger of bitter loss transformed into thriving and to promise. But in lockdown through COVID, his relationships, his support system of meetings and connection withered, and on Mother's Day, his mother called me to tell me that they'd found her son dead from an overdose and we cried together from a deep, a deep place in our heart. At the memorial, I said to all his loved ones there how afraid I was that I had failed him, had failed all of them maybe as his friend. Though everything I heard assured me that wasn't true, something in my bones ached to say that I might have or what the world might have been had something else changed, had I just done something different.

I think many of us have been there in this life. Many who struggle with addiction are thought actually to be unfeeling just because of the pain that their loved ones go through who can't arrest this destructive behavior. But the truth is, many of us in this world and not just those who suffer from addiction, I think a lot of people who find this faith, the problem is they feel too much. They feel almost everything so intensely that they need a way to cope and not all of those ways are as healthy as the others. And that's just the truth, guys.

At the memorial, another friend of ours sang Fields of Gold, the Sting song. It talks about seeing someone again after losing them in this life and maybe. That song still brings me to tears when I think of it and Matthew. Of course, it's not in the blues genre, but it shares much of the birth of the blues, a form of music that was hammered and carved and bent and shaped. The blues was by a people enslaved in this nation, forced to build the tremendous wealth so many still enjoy today who suffered such violations of their dignity, their rights, freedoms and humanity that may seem unspeakable, but must, must, must never be forgotten and definitely must never, never, never be erased, especially from textbooks in Texas, right?

And like so many things unspeakable, sometimes only music can make a sense of them. One of the elements of the blues that makes them the blues isn't actually the sadness, it's what comes after that. It's the absolute absurdity of it. The acknowledgement of the darkness, yes, that can take a person from crying that crosses with absurdity almost into laughing at what they are seeing and experiencing in this life, tears actually and laughter are after all what God gave us when speech fails.

I had an experience with this recently. As some of you know, I participated in the Dallas Marathon last Sunday. I'm happy to tell you that as you were convening here, the parish meeting, I was about two miles from the finish line and I really wished I had been at the parish meeting instead. Oh Nelly, it wasn't pretty guys, but I finished it, I did. Without going down this road too far, I'm going to give you some context of why I was doing it at all. On Inauguration Day this year, something inside me said, "Run. Run, run, run, run, run, run, run." I don't think I was alone in this, but instead of running to Canada, I started running around my neighborhood first, then around some lakes, then around the whole fucking city. I trained in deserts, I trained in the rain, I trained with friends, I trained in the dark. I had falls and sprains and injuries and cuts and scars, and I was even, I'm sorry, mama I know you're watching, even I was grazed once by a very unapologetic Honda Civic. Sorry. But all of this training culminated in Sunday's event.

Four or five of my friends had agreed all to run the marathon together, but slowly over the months and come race day, through injury and life and travel and what have you, there I was alone in a crowd of thousands. I want to thank those of you who came to cheer me on. I apologize to those of you I startled when I recognized you on the route and you didn't recognize me when I said hi. Sorry, I couldn't stop, I had something I was doing. All of this carried me to and around White Rock Lake where the cold north winds were gusting at 25 miles an hour and creating a wind chill of 18 degrees.

The fantasy of every runner of every race is that you can just train so well that that day is just sort of a technical achievement you're going to have. And for some, that might even be so, but for most of us, something more is required to finish, something more than a body could do alone. What we really need in that moment is a piggyback ride. No, I'm just kidding, we really need a golf cart or a scooter. No, my legs started to cramp up around mile 18 and I knew I was in for a rough time. So plodding now in pain, my mind started to consider how can I quit with my worth and dignity intact? Who would blame me? It's the weather after all. Who could fault me, right?

And I can't tell you I was thinking about much, particularly coherently, except the pain. So I checked in with Daniel to let you all know where I was and when I did, I saw that a friend had texted me to let me know that he was about three miles up ahead and he had his kids and his wife with him to help cheer me on. So I had no idea they were planning to do that and I knew I needed to make it to them at least so that the next three miles were really just to see them and maybe, maybe ask if I could get into their nice warm car, maybe do that.

So I turned, I stopped into Voodoo Doughnut, because we love Voodoo Doughnut, first on Greenville and I turned right onto Ross and I saw them a little down. And I went to my friend who is considerably taller than I am, I mean you all are, let's be honest, and I hugged him. I thought I was just going to do sort of like a bro tap, like, "Here we go, get on the way." But without thinking, as I hugged him, I just put my head on his chest and I cried, "It's so hard. It hurts so much." I could hear my voice high like that, like a child. He said, "I know, buddy." He's a Marine. "I know," he literally patted my head. He [inaudible 00:17:00] me like he would a crying child, which is exactly what I was. And he held my heaving chest. He said, "You're almost there." I said, "Okay."

You know how when you tell a kid they can't do something and they get it, but they say, "Okay," so I unclasped from him, I hugged his wife and I thanked his four kids who were looking at me like, "What is wrong with Uncle TJ?" And I trotted on, but I was cracked open now. It was on tears coming down my face and feeling more alive than I had in a long time, maybe since Inauguration Day. And my thoughts went actually in that moment to Matthew, who I think of every day, who I wonder still if I'll get to hug somehow. And I thought of the pain in his mother's voice who told me on Mother's Day that she'd lost her son and the horrible absurdity of so much we all have to deal with.

And I thought of a call I got from her a few months later to tell me that Matthew apparently, before he died, had met a very lovely woman who was planning to have his baby in a few months. And Oliver was born into a loving home, being raised by this amazing woman and this amazing grandmother and a dad who loves him like his own. And today still periodically, I receive photos of Oliver smiling away,

they're looking out at the world through his father's eyes. And because of this, I know and I tell you, mercy is real. Not in every life I know, but in this one, in this mother's life, and that's enough for me sometimes. While the tale of how we suffer and how we are delighted and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell. It's the only light we've got in all this darkness. We are almost there. You're almost there, friends. And we are so close to the end.

The earth is cracking like our hearts crack so much in this world of pain, but they crack not to hurt in the end, they crack not to punish in the end and not to make us feel ashamed or alone or wrong, they crack to let in the light of compassion, to let in the light of understanding, the light of mercy, the light in the end for all of love, the perfect bleak I know at times and blue too, but still the glorious, radiant light that beams, that holy light. Even if you are having trouble seeing it, even if you don't want to go on, I pray, I pray for you that this time together now holds you, urges you to stay a course through whatever you or your family or those you love are facing until grace may light your way. Again, go easy in this time, friends. Be gentle with yourself and others this week. We are all we've got and don't ever doubt that is quite a lot. May it ever be so, blessed be Merry Blues Christmas and amen.