

Fragility Is Life

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Every congregation has its peculiarities. Because this congregation has gotten used to having a minister around only one weekend each month, the Board is in the habit of meeting on Sunday nights. Now that there's a minister here more often than that, the Board briefly discussed the option now available of moving that Board meeting to another night of the week. After some discussion, I was assured that Sunday nights were still the most convenient time for the Board meeting.

Except it was noted that this meeting time might become more inconvenient once January rolled around. Because then *Downton Abbey* would be on TV.

A speaker has to know her audience, so this sermon is about to take a foray into *Downton Abbey* for a bit. How many of you do not know how the last season of *Downton Abbey* ended? Well you'll have to put your fingers in your ears for a bit. Spoiler alert!

At the beginning of this new season of *Downton Abbey* -- do you have your fingers in your ears? -- Lady Mary is still reeling from the death of her husband, Matthew. It's been six months since he died, and she feels the loss very keenly. Lady Mary's father, Robert (Lord Grantham), loves his daughter very much and wants to protect her. He is distressed at her distress and so Robert wants to minimize it. Robert's mother, the dowager Countess, Violet disagrees, however, with what Robert is doing. I think it's ok to talk about this because the scene I'm interested in is actually in one of the trailers that PBS was running even before the season started, so if you haven't been able to start watching the episodes yet, I'm not spoiling anything. You can blame PBS.

Lord Grantham and his mother, Violet, have the following exchange. Lord Grantham says of his daughter Mary, "She is broken and bruised, and it is our job to keep her safe from the world." To which Violet replies, "No, Robert. It is our job to bring her back to the world."

These are two very different approaches to fragility. Robert sees Mary as fragile and so wants to protect her from life. Violet sees Mary's fragility and so wants Mary to encounter life.

To say that life is fragile is not to say anything you haven't heard before. We are all very used to seeing life as fragile. And so it is. How quickly and easily it seems life can be taken away. Yesterday, there was a

celebration of the life of Valerie Stephens, one of the founding members of this congregation. Her life was taken by cancer and ended much, much too soon. It's not fair. It's not just. And even when it is not someone so close to us, life's fragility is so clear. I hear about a shooting in Maryland yesterday at a shopping mall and I think of how fragile life is. How much gun violence does there have to be before we reform gun laws? We think of how fragile life is after school shootings like Newtown, CT. After the death of Trayvon Martin. After the Boston Marathon bombings. After September 11. Tenacious though it also is, life is so tenuous. It is so scary when someone we love gets cancer like Valerie did, or has a stroke like Margaret did, or has an accident like Bill did while sledding, breaking his neck. Or even just the cold snowy winter we've been having here in Michigan. Life is fragile.

Lots of things are fragile. Help me out for just a moment. I want everyone who has a cell phone to hold it up. Hold it up in the air. Ok, now everyone who doesn't have a protective case on their phone, go ahead and put your phone away. How many hands went down? Not many! Ok, you can put your cell phones away -- unless you want to take a picture of this beautiful congregation first. Go ahead. Life is fleeting and fragile -- take a picture! Save it! All right, all right -- put your phones away.

It makes sense to put your fragile cell phone into a case that protects it. Just like it makes sense to wear a seatbelt when you are in the car. All of you should be wearing your seatbelt! I had a friend in graduate school who would never wear his seatbelt. This is one of the smartest guys I've ever had the privilege of meeting, and he wouldn't put his seatbelt on! It drove me nuts! Life is fragile. Wear your seatbelt!

And if you ride a motorcycle, wear a helmet! You are fragile. When I was working as a chaplain at a big hospital in Boston, one of the things that I always dreaded was the folks brought in after having an accident on their motorcycle. What a mess!

Working in that hospital was an intense encounter with the fragility of life. I knew something of the fragility of life before that. My mother's mother and my father's father both died of Alzheimer's. Not only did their bodies prove to be fragile, but so did who they were. My grandmother would get really angry and yell at people. So much so, they needed to move her to a different facility because it wasn't safe for her neighbors. You didn't know what she might do. And this is not at all the loving, happy folk dance instructor that I knew from my childhood.

Working in the hospital ramped up my encounter with the fragility of life. It was my job, really, to go and seek out fragility. Cancer, heart

disease, car accidents, gunshot victims, nervous breakdowns, depression, and people not knowing what was going on waiting, hoping, for the doctors to figure it out.

It's not easy to deal with that much fragility. It doesn't make any sense and none of it is fair. A mother was at her wits end over her daughter being slowly taken from her by disease. It doesn't make any sense, she said. It's not fair. No, I said. It's not fair. It's not fair at all.

To get to the hospital took a commute on the "T" plus a good walk. Much of the time I would listen to podcasts on my commute. One day, I heard an interview with someone I had never heard of before. His name is Xavier Le Pichon. He's a geophysicist -- he's quoted on the cover of the order of service. It wouldn't be right to say that his ideas made encountering fragility any less emotional for me. But it did give me a way to think about fragility that made me less afraid of it. Basically, what he did for me is encourage me to turn the phrase "life is fragile" around. I had only been thinking, like most of us do, that the fragility of life is an unfortunate reality. Something to guard against and to un-do as much as possible. But what if fragility is life?

Xavier Le Pichon is the scientist who, when he was 29 which was in 1966, made the first model of the tectonic plates that make up the earth's surface and how they move. I've never known another other than plate tectonics as the explanation for the surface of the earth, so it was pretty shocking for me to think that for the first half and more of the twentieth century, scientists were what is now called "fixist." They didn't think that the continents had changed at all. There had always been where they are now.

Mr. Xavier Le Pichon: The earth was considered a place where everything was static. You know, things were moving up and down but never laterally. Actually, the earth is an extraordinary living being with the motions of the oceans and continents continuously changing, evolving, and this was a tremendous shock.

Instead of ours being a static world, Hawaii is getting closer to Tokyo by eight centimeters a year. Le Pichon says

"I was very, very impressed by one of these things, which is the way earthquakes are fabricated, which is in the lower layer of the earth where the temperature is high. Then the defaults that are within the rocks are activated, and the rocks are able to deform without fracture, become what

we call ductile. You know, they flow. But when the temperature is low and cold — it's cold like in the upper few miles of the earth — then they are rigid. These weaknesses cannot be expressed, and as a result the rocks are much resistant, much more rigid, and they react by reaching their limit of resistance and suddenly, bing, you have a major commotion and an earthquake."¹

That image of weaknesses being expressed is so provocative! The ground that's able to move most easily is the ground that is most able to express its weaknesses.

And for Le Pichon, this isn't just a revelation about the earth. It's a revelation about people, about community, about humanity. He says,

"And I find in the society it's very often the same thing in the community. Communities which are very strong, very rigid, that do not take into account the weak points of the community, the people who are in difficulty and so on, tends to be communities that do not evolve. And when they evolve, it's generally by a very strong commotion, a revolution I would call it in French."²

In other words, the more that a community centers itself on the weak, the more easily that community evolves.

In an essay that he wrote, Le Pichon talks about how the one who is most fragile is put at the center of a society and how that changes a society. He notes the discovery in the 1950's of the skeleton of a Neanderthal man. Someone named Ralph Solecki found him. This man had died when he was forty years old. The remarkable thing was that the skeleton was full of many severe fractures *that had healed*. The injuries to this person were severe, including in the loss of most of his right arm and hand and his right foot was so badly broken that it had to have been extremely painful to try to walk on it, if indeed the man could walk at all.

His people were hunter-gatherers, always on the move, walking probably 5 to 10 miles a day. So they must have been carrying with them this one-armed, one-legged man. Solecki wrote, "That he survived for years after his trauma was a testament to Neanderthal compassion and humanity."

¹ Xavier Le Pichon. Interview by Krista Tippett. "Fragility and the Evolution of Our Humanity." <http://www.onbeing.org/program/fragility-and-evolution-our-humanity/101>

² Xavier Le Pichon. Interview by Krista Tippett. "Fragility and the Evolution of Our Humanity." <http://www.onbeing.org/program/fragility-and-evolution-our-humanity/101>

Xavier Le Pichon has lived out a commitment not only to science, but to fragility. He lived and raised his children in an intentional community centered on people and families dealing with disabilities. When you put fragility at the center of a community, a new way of life appears. Le Pichon says, "In this way of life, people will invent new goals for society like the goods of communication, openness and sharing: the person who is no longer capable of direct contribution to the survival of society discovers moreover that he is welcomed as a full contributor. And this welcome profoundly changes the community that practices it."³

For Le Pichon, "The fragility is the essence of men and women, and it is at the heart of humanity."⁴

The memorial service for Valerie Stephens that I went to yesterday was an example of this. Her husband, Guy, led the service. Her son and daughter, Gabe and Becca, participated, and so did many friends. And the hallmark of the service was an openness to fragility. They didn't deny the hard emotions, the anger and deep sadness they and all who knew Valerie feel because of her death. They walked together, and together all of us walked, right into all that fragility. I have never been to a more human or a more humane service. It was a celebration of humanity in its fullness.

Fragility is the essence of men and women, and it is at the heart of humanity.

I want you to think about this not just in reference to your own life, however. I want you to think about this congregation, too. Everyone here is fragile in one way or another. And to be a community that is about compassion and healing and justice means being a community that is open to fragility and centers on those least advantaged in our society. It means leaping to the task when asked to help, the way this congregation did when asked to participate in the rotating shelter for people without housing. It also means not being afraid to ask for help when you need it. What if fragility is life?

This congregation is in a period of change, of evolution. And how does a system evolve? By being able to express its weaknesses. If it gets too rigid, then that's an earthquake waiting to happen. This afternoon, we're going to explore the history of this congregation. And we're going to

³ Xavier Le Pichon. "Ecce Homo."

⁴ Xavier Le Pichon. Interview with Krista Tippet.

look for patterns in that history. What habits has the congregation formed? In order to grow -- in spirit, in awareness, as well as in numbers -- what weaknesses need to be expressed? What fears might the congregation have? How might those fears be creating rigidity?

I have gotten to know this congregation as full of life and energy, full of joy and good humor and compassion. I see a lot of exciting possibilities for you, and it is exciting to watch you as you grow into yourself. Wear your seatbelt!

May we all remember that it is OK to be fragile. It's what makes life and our humanity possible.

Amen

Fragility is the avenue of the life that maketh all things new.