

**THE POWER OF LIFE; EZEKIEL 371-14; PENTECOST, MAY 24, 2015;
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There's a marvelous new short biography of Vincent Van Gogh by writer and painter Julian Bell.

It's part of a series called "Icons." Van Gogh is an icon; he fascinates us not just because of what he accomplished but because of who he was.

Eldest son of a rural minister he was at odds with himself and others from early on. Awkward, opinionated, imposing, off-putting; on the one hand, he seemed the ultimate misfit; on the other hand, his artistic work but also his voluminous letters to his champion and benefactor – his brother Theo – reveal a perspective on people and the big questions of life as profound, insightful and life-affirming as his paintings.

So here's the point for Pentecost – Van Gogh was a person many of us would have dismissed; if he'd walked in here on a Sunday morning we might not feel safe going over to greet the unrefined, homely, aggressive-looking stranger.

Indeed, that's how people responded to him – from his neighbors to his employer to, finally, his own parents. His father tried to have him institutionalized for insanity on several occasions.

But then something happened. Going nowhere, still suffering from his anti-social, misfit behavior, on his sixth or seventh bottoming out, suddenly his life took on purpose and meaning. His brother Theo recognized Vincent's turning to drawing as a palliative when he was upset and suggested he become a painter. That's the nudge he needed; Vincent began to explore drawing (self taught), then oil paint, he connected with a deep undercurrent of creativity and compassion; his gifts began to blossom; he left one of the world's great legacies of art.

Other words for Pentecost could be renewal, rebirth or transformation; no one saw it coming in Van Gogh's case; no one could have predicted it; in fact, everyone thought his life would come to an ignominious, soon-to-be-forgotten end.

When Ezekiel stands in the valley of dry bones he is looking out at the wilderness path on which God's people were hauled into exile by the Babylonians. Bone fragments, dry bones, bones of God's people who died in the march to Babylon littered the landscape.

Ezekiel asks can these bones live? Can anything come of the disastrous death of God's dream for Israel? And then Ezekiel envisions the coming of a mighty wind that transforms the landscape and causes the dried up bones to come together into a living, breathing people again. It's as compelling a vision of death transformed to life as can be found anywhere. What we celebrate today is the ongoing presence of God, not as a person, Jesus, but as Spirit. We cannot pin the Spirit down, we don't know where it comes from or where it goes, it doesn't stay in the same place but it always brings the possibility of change and growth, it raises us, Ezekiel says, *from our graves* and results in new life.

But here's the rub for the church: nearly all churches say their desire is to grow. Often, however that profession means 'we want to grow if persons will conform to the traditions and values of our church, of our way of life, but we do not want to grow if it requires change.' The death of nine congregations a day in the United States is a testament to this hard-baked resistance to change and leaves a landscape like Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, littered with withered, dried up churches.

Fred Buechner's reflection on the church sheds some light: "Jesus made the church out of human beings," Buechner says, "with more or less the same mixture in them of cowardice and guts, intelligence and stupidity, of selfishness and generosity, of openness of heart and sheer cussedness as you would be apt to find in any one of us. The reason he made his church out of human beings is that human beings were all there was to make it out of. In fact, as far as I know, human beings are all there is to make it out of still. It's a point worth remembering."

Then he goes on, "maybe the best thing that could happen to the church would be for some great tidal wave of history to wash it all away – the church buildings tumbling, the church money all lost, the church bulletins blowing through the air like dead leaves, the differences between preachers and congregations all lost too. Then all we would have left would be each other and Christ, which was all there was in the first place."

Senior Rabbi of Temple Beth Zion Gary Pokras and I participated in a remarkable meeting last Monday in New York. There were rabbis and pastors from San Francisco, Los Angeles, Dallas, Houston, St. Louis, Chicago, Atlanta and New York. The purpose of the meeting was ostensibly to talk about Presbyterian divestment in three companies doing business in Israel to maintain the barrier of separation.

But the looming back drop to our conversation included the deepening turmoil and bloodshed across in the Middle East, spreading anti-semitism on college campuses here and the brutal attacks on Jews in Europe, Iran's nuclear ambitions, and Israeli leader Netanyahu's disregard for Palestinian suffering and his policies that are making it worse.

Our facilitators had us begin by talking about why this relationship with one another was important; we told personal stories, some that went back to childhood, some that revealed the depth of fear among Jews that a global boycott, divestment and sanction movement is isolating and demonizing Jewish people everywhere, and there were very human stories of rabbis reaching out to new pastors in their communities and pastors opening their doors to Jewish congregations whose buildings were lost in fire – not unlike Westminster and TBZ.

The event was convened by Rick Jacobs, head of the Union of Reform Judaism and Heath Rada Moderator of the PCUSA.

Our facilitators wisely had us begin at the level of our relationships rather than our politics or theology.

The goal was to try to bridge what seems a growing, dangerous divide.

Next we gathered in a room in which one wall was identified as “agree” and the other “disagree.” The facilitators read statements about religion and specific political issues. We were told to position ourselves, as if on a continuum, somewhere between agree and disagree to indicate where we stood regarding the statement.

The exercise was helpful in displaying how scattered we were on every question. Not all Presbyterians agreed with each other, nor all Jews, in fact on any given issue everyone was everywhere. There were clumps and clusters of course; and when a pastor or rabbi explained to the larger group why he or she was standing where they were standing everyone else was allowed to reconsider and take new positions on the agree/disagree spectrum.

What came through the exercise was the importance of our personal narratives and stories in helping to explain who we were and why we believed what we believe. Whereas in the morning when getting our coffee and nametags we seemed two distinct, monolithic groups at odds, by the afternoon, given the chance to get to know and listen to one another, we were a single group with something holding us together; we were able to make space for a wider range of opinions; we were less judgmental; we shared a longing for an end to the violence engulfing the world, and an end to the animosity and aggression between our national denominations. By the end of the day there was a discernable commitment to continue the conversation; to seek understanding, and healing and to share the work of justice.

Something happened to that collection of clergy. It was a Pentecost moment; disparate parts, fragmented relationships took on new life and possibility.

One rabbi of one of America’s largest synagogues said he is careful about expressing criticism of Israel for fear of isolating himself within his congregation and among his peers; one pastor of a large southern congregation said, at the end of the day, he wanted to build something bigger together but had to say he was still in favor of our the decision to divest.

We weren’t sure exactly what happened but it felt like we’d built a bridge; began a process of healing; hopeful that what seemed a status quo of disagreement and distancing would shift course and unite us.

We left the meeting feeling empowered, and going back to our communities realizing the importance of lifting up and listening to not just party line Jewish/ Presbyterian narratives but everyone’s richly nuanced narrative; to hear more Palestinian narratives, to take a trip together to Israel and the occupied territories.

We are living at an extraordinary time; the world is at once smaller than ever but also farther apart than ever and divided by what seem lethal forces.

Given the sound bite culture we live in it is all too easy, lazy and tempting to assuage our impatience and frustration by endorsing the plot du jour against the enemy du jour. But we don’t have time or luxury to take that course any longer.

From the middle east crisis to our own national turmoil we are living in a valley of dry bones: a racial divide – in which the recent wave of police shootings of young black men has given rise to a movement called “Black Lives Matter” as if fifty years after the Civil Rights Act we had forgotten that *all lives matter*.

There will be a Supreme Court decision on same sex marriage – determining whether it is a constitutional right or not at a time when gay and lesbian Americans are finally discovering increasing openness and welcome across the land, yet in some regions, communities and families same sex relationships are condemned and gay and lesbian teens continue to take their own lives.

Nor can we leave out of this litany the living wage movement: in a nation with a shrinking middle class and 1% commanding more and more of our collective wealth, getting support for what are still poverty-level hourly wages is resisted. And finally, the unrelenting, successful aim of a Republican-led congress (supported by gas and oil industry contributions) to roll back environmental protections and allow for more drilling and mining of our precious, disappearing wilderness – decimating endangered species and vast eco-systems.

The valley of dry bones, the valley of the shadow of death is a frightening, lonely place, especially if it’s your family or church or city or nation.

Israel in exile was as good as dead, cut off, without hope. Ezekiel’s vision told of a wind, a holy, mysterious, life-giving wind which blew through the valley and re-remembered those detached and scattered bones and gave them life.

I have seen and experienced in my own life, as I am sure you have too, – feeling cut off, without hope. Then, as if out of nowhere, a holy wind scatters the stagnant, suffocating air, refreshes and gives new life.

That’s what happened to Vincent Van Gogh and last Monday at a meeting of Jewish and Christian clergy in New York.

If any person or congregation survives in these times it will be as a result of God’s gracious Spirit bringing new possibility and new life.

In the last two most productive years of his short life Van Gogh seemed a man reborn; no longer plagued by isolation and dislocation he sang a new song; his high spirits spilled over when he stood at the easel into a reckless mélange of streaks, spots, splotches and bare patches. A fury of work possessed him he told his brother when he was face to face with the gaiety of a blossom or wheat field or star-studded sky. While he lamented his unsuccessful attempts to be a missionary or marry and have a family he found at last, a transcendent mission in his art: “I hope not to work for myself alone,” he said, “I believe in the necessity of a new art of color. And if we work in that faith, it seems to me there’s a chance that our hopes won’t be in vain and some of this work may be of lasting value.”

What masterpieces does God have in store for you and me to paint, to live, to leave as our legacy to a just and peaceful world? Amen.