THE FARAWAY NEARBY
A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton
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When I moved to New York City in 1995, I thought it would be temporary. One of the primary reasons I stayed and raised a family here is that it's the proving ground for my theology, always in development. I'm constantly in constellations of strangers: bumped aggressively by them while trying to board the bus, assisted warmly by people who look nothing like me, I observe bloody fights on the sidewalk and acts of generosity that never occurred to me to do myself. Sometimes I feel like a lone stranger in the midst of the activity and sometimes I feel like a tiny part of a giant interactive miracle machine.

A couple of months ago I was on the subway when a migrant woman and her toddler walked through the train car. She quietly proffered chocolate (*cho-koh-LAH-the)*, as her son walked beside her. They sat across from me to rest. Most of the seats were occupied in the car and no one in our vicinity was standing, so we could see each other clearly. The boy walked across the aisle and tucked his body over my knee and the knee of the man to the left of me. He started swinging himself over our two knees. The man and I were overjoyed to receive this darling boy's affection. It was an overwhelming feeling of sudden intimacy, I felt like we were grandparents together. I was rubbing the boy's back, and the man was patting his head.

But the poor mother was terrified, despite our warm reception. And then the woman next to her started yelling at her in English telling her not to allow her child to touch strangers (referring to the man and me). The woman yelling said she was a teacher and scolded the mother loudly for her negligence. The mother was more terrified. I said to the teacher that the mother probably could not understand English, please stop yelling. She responded, "She understands English fine. She said chocolate." Another man to my right side said he too worked with children and asked her firmly to stop yelling. The boy kept swinging. At the next stop, the mother stood up and gingerly took her child's hand, seemingly afraid of offending me by taking her child away. She and all the others got off the train. And I sat

alone without them, marveling over what had just happened. Each of us isolated, the mother most of all, and all of us profoundly connected by the innocent trust of the boy.

Whether we're interacting with strangers on a subway car, we're at a concert, reading a novel, watching the terrors of the news, sitting with friends at dinner, or alone at home with a bowl of cereal, we constantly drift in our feelings degrees of connection. Writer Rebecca Solnit uses the term "faraway nearby" as a way to describe our psychic geography—we can feel a thousand miles from the person next to us in bed and deeply invested in a stranger on the other side of the world. There is a dialectical flow of placing ourselves in relation to others, how connected we feel in general, how we sense our independence, and how we sense our interdependence.

When we feel strong and balanced, we enjoy the flux of independence and interdependence. We can respond with a sense of knowing how we can and can't affect what's happening around us, engaging hopefully. We are comfortable in the land of the faraway nearby.

However if we're not feeling strong and balanced, our sense of independence can cross the line into loneliness–we feel disconnected and isolated. Also our sense of interdependence can cross the line into powerlessness–we feel squeezed by all the conditions of our lives that are dictated by people and circumstances beyond our control. When we're experiencing mental health challenges, addiction, grief, the intensity of the news of others who are suffering, we can get stuck in loneliness or powerlessness or some heavy haze where they intersect.

The term faraway nearby comes from American painter Georgia O'Keeffe, known for her depiction of the landscape of New Mexico. She had a deep affection for the evocative loneliness of the bones-strewn desert amid the horizon of mountains. O'Keeffe had been living in New York City when she discovered the inspiration of New Mexico. She wrote, "I have wanted to paint the desert and I haven't known how. I always think that I cannot stay with it long enough. So I brought home the bleached bones as my symbols of the desert. To me they are as beautiful as anything I know." She was inspired by a solitude that characterizes her ashen paintings of skulls. She spoke of a sense of life in the bones and how she loved to look through the holes in the bones to make shapes in the desert sky. She took it all in, a feeling of being alone with the bones, and a sense that she was deeply connected to all life.

The term faraway nearby comes from her correspondence with her husband, Alfred Stieglitz, when he was in New York City and she was in New Mexico. He sometimes referred to her as "My Great-White-Faraway-So-Near-One." O'Keeffe also titled a painting "The Faraway Nearby." The subject is a mule deer skull sprouting a surreal array of antlers that takes up most of the space in the painting. It floats on a foreground of miniature mountains. The perspective in the painting--the skull's enormity relative to the mountains--emphasizes a gulf of imagined space between the distant landscape and the deer bones, fusing the faraway and nearby. Like when we take photos of something monumental from faraway, and we place ourselves just right in the camera lens so that we appear to be Herculean as we balance something on top of our hands--a redwood tree, the Statue of Liberty.

Rebecca Solnit's book *The Faraway Nearby* takes its title from O'Keeffe. The book is a memoir of intertwining stories that begin and end with Solnit's relationship with her mother, a bitter relationship after a violent childhood of wrathful and indifferent behavior on her mother's part. In the book Solnit describes caring for her mother after she's diagnosed with Alzheimer's. As her mother's memories and personality are obscured by cognitive decline, and her mother's angry narrative of her daughter dissolves, the two of them drift together in the faraway and nearby. Solnit is willing to forgive her mother for who she was and allow for the changing conditions of the relationship to bring them closer in a way. Solnit makes clear that she's not denying the past but allowing for what she describes as an "enriched" connection between them under the new conditions. For Solnit the faraway nearby with her mother is an amorphous pulling and pushing of the relationship.

Like O'Keeffe, Solnit maintains a keen curiosity about the mingling of her independence and interdependence, and the lifegiving and heartrending fluctuations between. Solnit writes, "the usual 'I' we are given has all the tidy containment of the kind of character the realist novel specializes in and none of the porousness of our every waking moment, the loose threads, the strange dreams, the forgetting and misrememberings, the portions of life lived through others' stories, the incoherence and inconsistency…" The dialectical experience of faraway and nearby at once: O'Keeffe in the desert, Solnit in her differentiation from her mother. They are both drifting in the porousness of how they relate to the surroundings

and the relationships of every waking moment. Both have devoted their lives to intentionally illustrating their experience for us, their viewers and readers.

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Morrie Schwartz was the star of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom's 1997 bestselling book. Morrie was Albom's beloved sociology professor, an energetic and captivating teacher who was adored by his students. He was also a swimmer, and a wild dancer. In his late 70s Morrie was having difficulty breathing, and after many tests and doctor visits, he was diagnosed with ALS. The book is based on a series of conversations between student and teacher as Morrie's condition worsened. Albom writes,

"Finally on a hot, humid day in August 1994 Morrie and his wife Charlotte went to the neurologists' office, and he asked them to sit before he broke the news…

'How did I get it?' Morrie asked.

Nobody knew.

'Is it terminal?'

Yes.

'So I'm going to die?'

Yes, you are, the doctor said. I'm very sorry.

He sat with Morrie and Charlotte for nearly two hours, patiently answering their questions. When they left the doctor gave them some information on ALS, little pamphlets, as if they were opening a bank account. Outside, the sun was shining and people were going about their business …

My old professor, meanwhile, was stunned by the normalcy of the day around him. Shouldn't the world stop? Don't they know what happened to me?

But the world did not stop, it took no notice at all, as Morrie pulled weakly on the car door, he felt as if he were dropping into a hole.

Now what? he thought."

Suddenly Morrie was at once completely alone and completely powerless. No doubt his wife Charlotte was too.

Horrible as his diagnosis was, it doesn't take a death sentence to feel we are dropping into a hole like Morrie. We can all cross that line from independence to loneliness and from interdependence to powerlessness; we

can get locked into despair for all kinds of reasons--illness, loss, and from a numbness that comes from trying to process what we can do about so much distressing global and domestic news.

And dear Professor Morrie, what did he do from this place of despair? It wasn't long after his diagnosis that he could no longer dress himself. He was told he had two years to live, but he knew it was less. He decided to fully engage with the world, respecting his limitations. He received the care of friends unabashedly. He talked about appreciating the affection of "being a child again." Albom writes, "As Morrie's body weakened, the back and forth to the bathroom became too exhausting, so Morrie began to urinate into a large beaker. He had to support himself as he did this, meaning someone had to hold the beaker while Morrie filled it. Most of us would be embarrassed by all this especially at Morrie's age. But Morrie was not like most of us. When some of his close colleagues would visit, he would say to them, 'Listen I have to pee. Would you mind helping? Are you ok with that?' Often to their own surprise, they were."

Morrie's openness captures the dialectical nature of the human condition, a constant location in both independence and utter dependence. It was up to him to decide how to receive his visitors, how to talk with them about his dying, how to ask them to help.

Morrie said to Albom, "Offering yourself to others is what gives you purpose. But it's also okay to let others offer themselves to you. We think we have to be the masters of our own lives, but really, we are all just walking each other home."

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In Whitman's poem, "The Noiseless Patient Spider," he describes the spider casting filament after filament after filament until one catches. Here we are, casting and catching each other's filaments in the vacant vast surrounding.

For months faith leaders and various organizations have been gathering at 26 Federal Plaza to sing and pray for the immigrant detainees, to cast filaments up the 10th floor ICE holding facility, a bridge to the people up there. I think of the mother and her son on the subway car, I wonder if they are there. And perhaps the songs also touch the hearts of the ICE agents inside—people who, like the teacher on the subway yelling at the mother, might feel they are doing the right thing.

May our faith in the faraway nearby stretch across the vacant vast surrounding. May we find ways to cast and catch filaments to touch others, to make peace with ourselves and our world.