

My Greatest Landscaping Achievement (and Other Lessons in Love)

9/8/2024

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:
Mark 7:24–37

I would guess that our scripture reading this morning made a few of you uncomfortable, right? Let's be honest, Jesus is acting like a jerk: He refuses to heal a woman's daughter of a demon just because she isn't Jewish like him. And worse, he demeans her, dehumanizes her—he calls her a dog. YIKES. For those of us who are deeply committed to acceptance, inclusivity, and equality—who perhaps base these deep commitments on the teachings of Jesus, this problematic piece of scripture can feel like a bucket of cold water to the face.

Then, for his next trick, Jesus hawks a loogie in some guy's mouth. Gross. Imagine being the Son of God—being able to walk on water and still storms with a word—but not being able to heal someone without the power of saliva. Really? We appreciate the healing, Jesus, we do, don't get us wrong, but the theatrics are a little lowbrow. OK? Maybe just wave your hands around a little bit if you really need to do something, but keep your spit to yourself.

So, this morning Jesus is being a gross jerk. And that by itself makes us uncomfortable. And we're also wondering what it is that any of this could have to do with the fact that today we're saying goodbye to one another.

My hope is that if I leave behind any small legacy in this pulpit, it will be that (like the Syrophenician woman) I was willing to argue with God. And that I argued with God, not just in a theatrical way, just some phony-baloney rhetoric to eventually come back around to the preordained position and "realize" that it was right all along. No, I hope, I pray that I have argued with God, for you, honestly and sincerely, with all the passion of a mother fighting for the soul of her daughter.

Because I'm of the opinion that our faith requires more of us than just belief. Our faith sometimes demands that we wrestle—that we wrestle with this world, that we wrestle with ourselves, that we even, at times, wrestle with God. As the famous story from Genesis of Jacob wrestling with God (Genesis 32) shows us, it's in wrestling with God that we're transformed and blessed. Wrestling with God with and for all of you has certainly been one of the great blessings of my life.

And I've come to believe that when we wrestle with God all night long—like Jacob did—that we're not the only ones who are transformed at the break of day. God cannot emerge from wrestling with us unscathed, unmoved by what has happened between us. I hope that I have demonstrated to you, as your spiritual leader, that I trust God entirely—not because God is perfect, not because God is all powerful, not because God is unchanging, but because God is love. And when you love someone, you listen to them. When you love someone, you argue with them. When you love someone, you learn from them, you change for them. Love changes the one who loves. And the more we love, the more we are transformed.

If God is love, then God is changing. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel put it: God is the Most-Moved Mover. Here's the quote in its entirety: "If we put aside the categories and logic of Greek philosophy and try to understand biblical religion in its own terms, we will soon discover that the God of the bible is not Aristotle's impassive, unmoved mover at all; he can only be described as 'the Most-Moved Mover'... According to the Bible, the single most important thing about God is not his perfection but his concern for the world."

I love that Jesus—despite our insistence to the contrary—refuses to be perfect. I love that, instead, a gentile woman from Tyre is allowed to argue with God, joining the sacred and audacious ranks of Abraham, Moses, and Job before her. She argues with God, and she wins, teaching Jesus himself a profoundly Christian lesson: If you believe that your God has great power to save you and there's not so much as a little crumb of mercy left over for me, then your hope for your own salvation is a fool's dream. Because if you claim to have bread for yourself, but there are no crumbs for anyone else, then you in fact have no bread. It's in the very nature of bread to make crumbs that fall all over the place, just as it's in the nature of the Kingdom of God to be uncontainable, unrestrictable, uncontrollable. The

Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows into a weed that takes over the whole field and grows into a great bush that all the birds of the air can nest in. The Kingdom of God is like yeast. Scrape a little of this fungus off the rotten grapes in your vineyard and put it in your flour and it will spread and grow until the whole big batch is leavened.

Our commitment as Christians to a vision of the Kingdom of God which “draws the circle wide” and is inclusive of all people is based, in part, on what Jesus taught us. *And* it is based, in part, on what the Syrophenician woman taught God. I hope if there is any small legacy to my leadership here at Glen Ridge Congregational Church it will be that I did my best to draw the circle wide. And to do that I let myself be tutored by Jesus *and* by the kinds of people who Jesus himself was tutored by—those who are standing outside of our circles. We do not build the Kingdom of God through our own perfect theologies, our own perfect ideologies, our own perfect ideas—we build the Kingdom of God through love: through an unending commitment to learn from and to be changed by all our neighbors.

Crumbs and weeds and fungus and growth: That’s the Kingdom of God for you, says Jesus. Oh, and let’s not forget: spit too. Jesus came down from heaven to earth, but he never behaved as if he were something other than an earthling. Sure, he occasionally seemed to bend the rules of this world (at least as we perceive them) when he turned water into wine or something like that, but he never used his powers to make himself powerful or to remove himself from the ultimate limitations or the brute realities of this existence. He lived with us in the world completely and (according to his critics) profanely: He healed on the sabbath, he ate with tax collectors, he drank with sinners, he touched the untouchable, he spat in the eyes of the blind and in the mouths of the mute, and their eyes were opened and their tongues were loosed.

If I have any small legacy here at Glen Ridge Congregational Church as a visionary for what the Church should be, I hope it would be that I was an advocate for worship, for religion, and for community that has a little spit in it: worship, religion, and community that is fully human, fully alive, fully embodied, and not embarrassed by it. If Jesus healed with spit, aren’t we called to embrace the messiness and the intimate rawness of our own humanity? And, Beloved, perhaps one or two of the things that we think of as too profane, too impolite, or too risky, in fact, have every bit as much sacred potential in them as Jesus’ spit.

Yes, we have very impressive stone walls here at Glen Ridge Congregational Church, an incredible and well-loved organ, and beautiful, historic stained glass, but don’t mistake this house of God for the seat of some sanitized religion. Glen Ridge Congregational Church is a place of intimacy, connection, and engagement, full of wonderful people who are not afraid to reach out to one another or to try new things. A church is not a building. It’s a people. And as I prepare myself to leave here, it’s all of you—the church, the people—that I will dearly miss.

Bonnie, the boys, and I moved to Ellenville, NY two weeks ago. And toward the end of that first week my dad and my sister came over to visit and see the new place. For dinner that night we walked one

block down our road and got a table at an Italian restaurant right in the “theater district” of downtown Ellenville. And I was beginning to feel the finality of the move—that this wasn’t just a visit anymore, that this was my home now, and that meant I was leaving behind a lot of people I love.

I stood up from my table after dinner and turned around and strangely thought I recognized the back of somebody’s head who was sitting at the bar. It couldn’t be. Could it? I walked over and it was, indeed, Cherry Provost sitting with a friend of hers. If you don’t know Cherry, she’s a longtime member of GRCC. And if you do know her, you know that she would want me to tell you that she was only sitting at the bar because there were no tables available, and she was just eating dinner. Well, anyway, we were both surprised to see one another and we had a lovely chat.

As I walked home, I couldn’t believe it. My first real outing after the move, and here was one of my own, sitting at the bar a block from my house. I found it very comforting to be reminded that although I have to say goodbye to all of you and although it’s critically important for us all to recognize the end of my role as your pastor and senior minister, it’s nice to be reminded that I haven’t actually moved to another dimension. And I am sure that God and love will keep us connected in appropriate, boundaried, and maybe sometimes surprising ways—when the time is right.

Well, when the time is right, I look forward to it. But now I really do have to say goodbye. Thank you all for everything. I am deeply, deeply grateful for everything you have given to me. It has been my great honor to serve as your pastor. I have given you my imperfect best. And I have felt that it was received and appreciated. I leave here feeling deeply loved. Thank you.

I’ll ask you now to turn your attention to the front cover of the bulletin. There’s a picture there of Romey and Felix in the parsonage back yard standing in front of an oak tree sapling. I love that little oak sapling. I’m VERY proud of it. I consider it my greatest landscaping achievement and something like my third son. I didn’t buy it at the nursery. I didn’t plant an acorn there. The tree just grew.

The parsonage backyard “lawn” is an interesting and eclectic mix of vegetation. But it was hard to tell what was really back there when I was cutting it all down every week, so in 2020 (during CVOID when a lot of us got some crazy ideas) I just decided to let about half the back yard lawn grow out, just to see what would happen. And one of the things that happened was this little oak tree—in just the right spot too. So, when I started cutting the lawn again, I cut around him. And now, four years later, I hope and pray he’s big enough that no one cuts him down for a long, long time. He’s my greatest landscaping achievement and I didn’t buy him, I didn’t plant him, I didn’t really do a thing. I just got out of his way, and he grew on his own.

Goodbye, Glen Ridge Congregational Church. I’m going to step out of the way now, and I trust that you will keep growing. Amen.