

Sermon Blurb (Published in the Newsletter)

Loving Kindness: In the first of two sermons for seminary preaching class, seminarian John Cooper will reflect on the grace of loving kindness, including the way that it can open us to inspiration and new learning. How does a Universalist reading of Matthew 15:21-28 relate to Brigid and inspiration found by embracing the stranger?

Prayer/Meditation (During the service)

Everliving God, we rejoice today in the fellowship of your blessed servant Brigid, and give you thanks for her life of devoted service. Inspire us with life and light, and give us perseverance to serve you all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (Epsicopal Lectionary, Saturday February 1, 2014)

Format: Sermon as a Journey to Celebration

Will start off with the biblical text, told as a story, connecting it to our lives and in doing so provoke a challenge, and lead to a celebratory closing, where the challenge is resolved through inspiration and grace, with an evangelical message to spread loving kindness

Biblical Story

Loving Kindness....Loving Kindness

Usually in a story about spiritual teaching and grace, we expect the teacher to impart wisdom, right?

We expect the teacher to know her way, to know his purpose, and to know the lesson?

We expect an agenda, resulting in learning.

What if something challenges the teacher? Interrupts the agenda.

I want to talk to you today about a story from the gospel of Matthew, one that has specific and important meaning to me, as a Christian-ish Taoist Buddhist Pagan-esq Unitarian Universalist preacher-chaplain type person.

Now as this story goes Jesus was walking down the road in an unfamiliar land.

Just finished healing some people and doing some stuff.

The sun was beating down hot on the road, and he and his disciples were walking.

Just finished chewing out some scribes and elders for telling him that tradition was more important...

More important than following the call of God, and performing acts of kindness and grace.

He just finished trying to explain that its what we say and do that matter to God

Not if we follow the rules. Not really.

I should probably pause here and define my terms.

Address my use of the “G-word” because I know that some of us here have been beaten by folks using that word, in the name of that word.

I know that people have done a lot of nasty things using that “G-word.”

But my God concept comes from my favorite Unitarian Universalist theologian, James Luther Adams,

Words he wrote in his essay A Faith for the Free, published in 1946. Some of you have heard this before from me, but it bears repeating:

“God is that reality which works upon us and through us and in accord with which we can achieve truth, beauty or goodness. It is that creativity which works in nature and history, under certain conditions creating human good in human community.” (Adams, 33)

When I talk about God in this story, I am talking about that transformational, creative, inspiring, loving,

guiding spirit that calls us to our better selves.

That intangible something that invites us to live in loving, kind relationship with all of creation.

But that's a lot of words, so if you don't mind, I would like to use the "G-word" instead.

So Jesus rebuked the scribes and elders for getting rules and goodness confused...and he was probably on his way to do some more healing and acts of kindness for the people of Israel.

Now I want you to picture Jesus, with his entourage, walking down the road, full of spiritual authority, surrounded by devoted disciples, tough hard workers, strong, like fisherman and farmers.

Picture that dirt road, with a throng moving along it, the heat of the day filling the air.

People try to approach him, but his Israelite disciples around him check IDs and try to make sure that Jesus is safe, at least as best they can...these muscled, tough farmers, fishermen and working folk.

And around this entourage there is a woman, wailing. Crying out for help.

She is not like them. She is an outsider. The wrong color. The wrong gender. She is shouting.

"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

Her daughter is tormented by a demon.

Her daughter.

Anyone who has ever contemplated the suffering of a loved one.

The torment of a child....her clothes probably smell of sickness, of her fear, her daughter's illness

Her hair ragged, tortured. And she wails for help...her daughter is tormented by a demon.

Anyone who encounters this figure, this pain...their heart out to break at that statement.

But what does Jesus do? He doesn't answer her at all.

He just keeps on walking. Down the dirt road...one sandal in front of the other...walking in thought...

And what do his disciples do? Surrounding him in the heat of the day?

Feet crunching as they walk the dirt road?

She runs alongside for a while, they tell Jesus, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."

She keeps shouting after us.

Shouting. Wailing.

So send her away.

Jesus calls out, maybe to his disciples, maybe to her "I was sent for the lost children of Israel"

He is not for her. His grace, his authority, his healing power...he is meant for the people of Israel.

The chosen people of God.

The privileged.

She runs ahead and catches up and kneels, begging for his help.

Her knees probably tear on the stones of the road as she skids to her knees by him.

But her daughter is tormented by a demon. Suffering in sickness.

"Lord, help me." She begs. Throws herself down. Pleads.

Jesus responds "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Not fair. To take food from the children of Israel.

The chosen ones.

To feed the dogs. The outsiders.

Jesus says that its not fair for him to waste his energy.

On the dogs. She feels like a dog...kneeling in the dirt...begging...

But in her fervor, her desperation, her humiliation, she does not back down.

Even there in the midst of the crowds. Watched by these Israelites...where she is an outsider.

Surrounded by strangers, looking up at this master of spiritual authority.

She challenges this master. She actually looks up and challenges the teacher.

This man who has the courage to rebuke the scribes, the elders, the establishment.

This child of God who has demonstrated the power to work miracles.

Who has fed thousands. Walked on water.

His presence, his charisma, his authority must have been almost unbearable.

But she, for the sake of her daughter...her daughter's suffering.

Challenges him - she looks up and says

“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”

Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs.

She doesn't even say she is anything other than a dog...

For the sake of her daughter. She just begs. In desperation.

Can you imagine the reaction of his disciples? The people around him?

They would all be watching him? To see what Jesus would do.

Would he smite her like Moses? David? This son of David. This King?

They would have all believed he had such power. Would have done it for him if he asked...dragged her away, beat her at the side of the road...it was all over their sacred texts...God had commanded it before.

But Jesus, this teacher, this one who came to change all of that...he doesn't do that.

He answers her, ““Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

And her daughter was healed instantly.

Her daughter's suffering ended.

(Relating it to Our Lives)

I love this story. It is a story of loving kindness. Of beautiful loving kindness.

Its a story of a teacher, who was about his mission, his purpose, who had direction.

Followers. Responsibility to his people. His tribes.

Its a story of a teacher who stopped in the midst of all of that.

And changed direction. Changed all the rules. For the sake of compassion.

For loves' sake.

Its a story of inspiration. A moment of that creative inspiration that invites us into loving kindness.

I remember when I first came into clinical pastoral education.

My first week. First orientation. No idea what I was doing at all.

Father Lincoln Ure, the director of the program said to us

“Just act from loving kindness...if you bring loving kindness then you will do ok”

It was perhaps one of the most bizarre professional training statements I had ever heard.

I wanted some rules to follow, some guidelines...I wanted to know what to expect.

What I quickly learned is that when I think I know what to expect.

I am like Jesus on the road, surrounded by my agenda, my own ideas, my own people.

And I miss the woman who's crying for help. I forget that loving kindness doesn't follow an agenda.

One of my worst moments as a chaplain was related to having an agenda with a patient. She was an older woman, on the ICU, and the staff was very worried about having to respond if she coded.

The medical term “code” means when someone's heart stops. The staff was worried about what they would have to do if her heart stopped.

By law, unless they have advanced directives from a patient, or clear direction from a legal spokesperson, medical staff have to perform CPR and take extreme measures to try and restart a heart.

She was in her late 80's. Her body was frail. Restarting her heart would probably break her ribs.

Putting the breathing tube down her throat would cause probably irreparable damage.

I had a good agenda...walking into her room was like walking down the road

With all the good company of my Israelite companions, to spread the good word.

To take care of her. I wanted to do advanced directives with her.

To follow the rules so that she would not have to go through more suffering.

I tried, several times, to get her to talk about the advanced directives.

Something was bothering me.

I was there for the Israelites...the advanced directives...

I brought the visit in for verbatim with my peer. For reflection with them.

I had to...something seemed wrong.

I didn't get her to do the advanced directives. She wouldn't talk about them.

In verbatim, my peers noticed that she had been trying to tell me her life story.

Wanted to talk about losing her husband. The death of one of her children.

What it was like to live in an old body breaking down.

She wanted to touch her happy memories, her sad memories.

Like the woman, by the side of the road. She tried to interrupt my agenda.

To my shame, I didn't let her. Each time she tried to share her story.

I brought her back to the advanced directives...for her own sake...

“I am for the people of Israel”

Looking at the visit with my peers was an incredible learning experience.

I felt the heartbreak of what we call “empathic failure” - I recognized that I had failed to listen

There is a creative moment that calls us to listen, to leave our course.

To let the woman suffering by the side of the road interrupt us.

The patient in the hospital interrupt our agenda, so that they can be heard.

When we hear them, when we stop and express that loving kindness, then they are healed.

“Woman how great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish.”

Today is February 2nd. Imbolc. The festival of lights. Of inspiration.

It is sacred to the triple goddess Brigid...from whom we get the Catholic saint St. Brigit.

One of the aspects of Brigid is that of creative inspiration.

Another is the crucible. The forger's fire.

I tell you this. I certainly felt like I was in the crucible sharing that visit with my peers.

I felt the way Jesus must have felt on that road. With everyone watching.

When he realized what he was doing...how he was passing by that suffering.

How he could rebuke the scribes and elders, for failing to respond with kindness in the name of the law, of rules...and how he was carrying on in his agenda, without seeing her suffering.

We see a very human Jesus in this story. On his way, focused. Ignoring that which interrupts him.

Inspires.

But what Jesus does sets an example for all of us. He embraces that burning inspiration.

That crucible fire. The fire that transforms, shapes, burns us into new shapes.

And he uplifts this woman that he just called a dog.

He swallows his pride, and he uplifts this woman he called a dog.

He welcomes the stranger, the other. This Canaanite. This woman from the people his tribes have fought for generations.

Jesus praises her. “How great is your faith.” And then he eases her suffering. Her daughter is healed.

What an incredible example for us.

I remember other times in the hospital where I did follow that inspiration. That call.

A woman crying in the emergency room area. When I stopped I helped her find her way...and she found her family before they were moved to another facility.

A man standing in a hallway looking lost. I stopped and found out he was a world-war II veteran, waiting for his wife. I learned that nobody in his family wants to hear his stories. I heard two stories of his life in the war, and he left with a huge smile on his face when his wife was ready.

Visits where I followed someone off the beaten path, into unusual, creative conversations, and where their stories were heard and there was healing.

There are many moments for me where that creative inspiration did draw my attention.

What follows it are amazing moments. At times, even miraculous moments.

You know what happens after this story in Matthew?

(Celebration)

Jesus goes into about a frenzy of healing. Yeah. He heals “multitudes” and amazes crowds.

He feeds thousands. His miracles go on overdrive.

Shortly thereafter, he has his famous conversation with Peter where Jesus is declared the messiah.

After a woman interrupts him on his way and he embraces her suffering.

Its that moment of inspiration, sacred to Brigid, to this time of year.

That interruption that calls us to deeper grace.

Now we come to one of my favorite reflections about this story.

Brigid is famous for bringing healing, inspiration, and the change of the forger's fire.

Maybe its a little heretical of me to imagine that Jesus was interrupted on the road by the inspiration of a Celtic Goddess. And that as a result, she brought healing...transformation...and the grace of the God that I envision, that call to goodness and loving kindness, to the strangers.

The Canaanites. That it was the cry of a woman who brought that change.

I don't know.

But the idea does tickle me.

The idea of the creative feminine inspiring Jesus.

When we encounter something that interrupts our agenda, our plan.

And we listen to that fire of inspiration. Like Jesus did on that road. Where he praised an outsider.

Set her above his own people. And its after healing her suffering that he comes into his full power.

When we stop and listen to that call - miraculous things can happen.

Seminary made deeper my relationship with my faith, with creation, with the sacred; it also clarified my agenda.

Sometimes like Jesus, I respond to the cry of the other, the stranger

"I am here for the Unitarian Universalists"

Sometimes in a hospital room, I catch myself wanting to preach. To follow that road.

Its not an accident that it was a gentile woman who helped Jesus see that God's grace is for all.

"Are not the dogs to be saved as well?"

If I am paying attention with loving kindness.

Then when I walk into a room with a patient and see family of someone who is dying, I forget the mission that sent me to seminary, to preach into the world religious liberty and the freedom to follow

your heart and soul, the way the sacred speaks to each of us.

I forget that I am in the room of people who are different than me.

Who may have been involved in putting in place legislation that bothers me.

If I am lucky, I forget my agenda, and my identity.

The identity that puts me with what I consider to be the chosen ones.

My people of Israel.

You folks here.

And I all I hear is the suffering.

“My daughter is tormented by a demon”

And if I listen to that call. That voice of the stranger.

Then I can respond with loving kindness.

When I do that I have been embraced, I have seen joy, relief, I have seen healing.

If I forget what I am about...and listen to the interruption.

The stranger. The inspiration. Every one of us has that power.

We are strong voices for change in this denomination.

We are not afraid to challenge the scribes, the elders, the Pharisees of the world.

When we speak in the world it is with the prophetic voice of justice, equality and liberation.

Let us also embrace our power to be interrupted.

Inspired. Changed. Burned in the smith's crucible. Struck by the voice of a goddess.

The power to answer the cry of the stranger by the road.

To respond with loving kindness, healing, grace, instead of always staying our course.

Then lets watch what miracles come into the world.

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Appendix:

The Faith of a Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15: 21-28, NRSV Translation)

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and

urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." 24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." 26 He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." 28 Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.