

REFLECTIONS
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Chris Morehouse

I've been working on my listening. And when speaking, to speak with care. It's a work in progress.

But there's an experience I'd like to share with you.

Through Facebook, I've been reconnecting with some high-school friends for a few years now. One of them is now an atheist. A very vocal one. He seemed surprised and dismayed that I have ended up where I am.

So we've been having some interesting conversations. I have tried to listen. In addition, I try to keep the tone civil, not get personal, and not insist on having the last word. Without expecting reciprocation.

Typically, I engage with "There's another way to look at that." Or "We're not all like that."

But I have to say I found it stunning when he reacted with sarcasm to my observation that the heart of the Gospel is about love. "Really?" was the response. How could that be, I thought? How could anyone miss it? The core of Jesus' teaching: "Love your neighbor as yourself," "Love each other as I have loved you," "And the greatest of these is love..." "Love your enemies." Or through the lens of love's opposite, in a passage that might have resonance this week: "You cannot say you love God and hate your neighbor."

And Paul, too: "Love is patient, love is kind..." "Perfect love casts out fear," and "If a person hath not love..."

And yet. I think we know. Last week, John reminded us about ways of claiming to follow Christ that may put love to the side. I think we've all had experiences of that. And it's something I don't think we can ignore.

But there's more to this story. When my atheist friend initiated contact with me on Facebook, right away, he apologized for his small role in the personal nightmare that was my high school experience. He was the only one of my old high-school friends to do that. Even though I hadn't thought about it for years, that meant a lot.

There's a passage in John about how everyone who has love, knows God (1 John 4:7-8). Everyone. Even those who make us uncomfortable. Even those we may not approve of. Even those we dislike. I think that's exactly what Jesus is trying to say in the story of the Good Samaritan. As many of you know, Samaritans were a distrusted, despised group. For Jesus' listeners, Samaritans were the least likely people to show love for others. Put another way, as a hated "other," a Samaritan might not be expected to have much love to share.

But there you have it. In God's extravagant, unreasonable economy of grace, love is enough, and everyone belongs.

Jesus keeps explaining in many different ways, that it's not about going through the

motions of piety. It's not what you know. Not what verses you know by heart. Not the doctrines or even beliefs we hold. In other words—in words that shattered the purity code—it's not what goes into your mouth. It's what comes out. It's about speaking and acting in loving ways. In these ways, large and small, through love, we extend the kingdom of God, no matter what labels we wear.

May it be so.

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K Schultz

Good Morning.

I will reflect this morning on a part of today's gospel reading, one of many troublesome gospel stories and conclude with reflections on today's psalm 133.

First, in Matthew 15: v 21 28, - Here's the familiar story - Just arriving to teach in Tyre and Sidon, we hear how annoyed the disciples and Jesus were with a Canaanite woman who was screaming at Jesus, begging him to heal her afflicted daughter. She would not shut up.

First the disciples urge their teacher to "take care of her"! Give her what she wants, please! Quiet her!

But Jesus says his hands are too full already, trying to teach the "lost sheep" of Israel.

The woman continues. She falls to her knees at Jesus' feet, begging for help.

Jesus again denies her, comparing her to a dog (who would give their children's food to a DOG?!). She protests, "but the dogs at least get crumbs from the table!"

Moved by and amazed at her persistence and faith, Jesus grants her wish and her daughter is healed.

So where are you and I in this story?

Are we the disciples – so very tired of hearing from needy folks who scream the same plea over and over again. We want them to shut up and go away. We do not want our tranquility disturbed; we don't want to hear about their need.

Are we like Jesus. We have too much to do already! We have our own flock. It is full of people who require our care and attention. We are worn out. Why beg us to do more – and for THOSE people?!!

Or are we instead the Canaanite woman – Caregivers seeking healing for one of our beloveds? Are we dogged in our persistence like she is? Are we courageous and faithful like she is? Is our love so strong that we push through humiliation, shame, fatigue and fear and keep advocating for our dear ones?

Where are you in the story?

Where am I?

I am all three.

Like the disciples, I have wanted difficult people (outside and inside my circle) to shut up (remember Archie Bunker telling Edith - just STIFLE yourself!). Or, sometimes I have caved in and given them what they want to just shut them up. Or my third strategy - I have withdrawn – mostly into work projects.

Healthy boundaries have always been a struggle for me. I'm learning. Slowly. Where is the line between helping and hurting, between encouraging and indulging, what is healthy support that doesn't foster dependency?

One way I am learning is from being a part of the Shepherd Village senior cohousing project. Shepherd Village, like SPC, is a "school of love". We have developed ground rules for our work together which say (among other things) that we will listen from the heart and seek to understand, respond respectfully to others concerns, value the person while disagreeing with their idea, speak from the heart, be clear, be kind, be brief, and trust that a solution is possible. The deepening Community is a gift and a challenge.

Like Jesus in the story I have often felt and sometimes said to myself, OH, my hands are already TOO FULL. I have too much to do, too many to care for. Don't trouble me with your pain or your need.

And like the Canaanite woman, I have sometimes found the ability, energy and courage to first be present to and then advocate for my beloveds. In NAMI's Family to Family program in 2009, John and I learned about chronic mental health conditions and I began to dissolve my resistance to reality. I found acceptance but it took a while.

As Jesus was doing, we mostly focus on **our own agenda and goals** and don't want to be distracted by life RIGHT HERE in this moment. Confronted anyway, we are resistant, resentful, annoyed.

In the story, Jesus forgets who his neighbor is. We do too. Whether kinfolk near or far, on opposite sides of the widening political divide, or simply edgy, obnoxious friends or neighbors, all are our kinfolks. Sometimes their persistence helps begin to soften our hearts. Instead of walling them out, something shifts. We come to believe that our differences can strengthen our kinship. We become channels for acceptance and love.

Psalm 133 celebrates community and kinship. In Nan Merrill's paraphrase *Psalms for Praying*, she writes

“Behold, how good and pleasant it is

When brothers and sisters dwell in unity!

It is like vistas seen from atop a mountain one has climbed . . .

Or like the stillness of a sunset after a long day's work.

It is like a shimmering rainbow, breaking through a summer rain.

When men and women dwell in harmony, the star of Truth appears!”

Or Peterson's The Message, last line,

“Yes, that's where God commands the blessing, ordains eternal life.”

Kinship is true but not easy.

The psalmist says the sunset is enjoyed after a long day's work. The beauty of the world is best appreciated after a long climb. A rainbow appears after a rain.

In this story, Jesus is as human as we are and shows us that everyone sometimes walls off their boundless, compassionate heart. It is a part of being human. But life keeps calling even when we would rather ignore it. Kinship keeps claiming us even when we wish certain people were not our kin.

The Psalmist urges us to be open to the **deep richness** of the **present moment** while still hiking up the mountain. Both are rich parts of being alive and gifted with Love.