



Calvary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, March 5, 2023

LENT 2: *"Smashing Alabaster: Beloved Community"*

Pastor Eyde Mabanglo

SCRIPTURE—LUKE 13:31-35 (The VOICE)

³¹ Right then some Pharisees came and warned Him.

Pharisees: *You'd better get out of here because Herod is plotting Your murder.*

Jesus: *³²You can give that sly fox this message: "Watch as I cast out demons and perform healings today and tomorrow, and on the third day I'll reach My destination. ³³But for today and tomorrow and the next day, I have to continue My journey, for no prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem."*

³⁴O Jerusalem! O Jerusalem! You kill the prophets and you stone the messengers who are sent to you. How often I wanted to gather in your children as a hen gathers in her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing to come to Me. ³⁵Look now, your house is abandoned and empty. You won't see Me until you welcome Me with the words of the psalms, "Anyone who comes in the name of the Eternal One will be blessed!"

SERMON

Jessica was a confident young high school girl and injured just before she was to depart on a leadership program especially designed for competent, successful youth. She was selected out of almost 50 applicants and the first part of this month-long youth development experience was a week-long wilderness training in the Appellation Mountains.

She stood on the rocks, dressed like the rest of her peers but wearing a brace on her left knee – she stared up at the stone edifice in front of her – a looming rock

wall she was asked to climb, using her might, her fingers, her toes, and her inner strength.

It was just a moment later that she found herself over 10 feet in the air, but still an overwhelming 20 or more feet from touching the top rock of that challenging wall. She was stuck on the side of this wall with all her weight on her good leg, but every time she tried to reach for the next finger hold her foot with slip off the cleft and she was saved by the rope anchored by a climbing partner standing firmly at the top of the cliff. She worked herself to the hold again in the same spot. Her good leg held all her weight and just out of reach of the next fingerhold. After several attempts and an equal number of falls, she now stays paralyzed by fear, frustration, and fatigue. 10 minutes became 20; 30 minutes turned into almost an hour. Her limbs grew tired just as the words of encouragement from her not-yet-lifelong friends grew and their sincerity, yet she now wondered if she'd make it to the top.

She stood on the face of the rock wall. Water trickled down the stone, making the rocks even more slippery. A cut from her strong finger made her adjust her hold to rely on two weaker ones. The reality of her predicament settled in her soul. She was absolutely determined to get up the wall, yet she had exhausted her muscles and her will. As is the case in life and spiritual matters, every time she hoisted her spirit and her energy, she slipped. So, she offered a prayer – *"OK God. So, I guess the only way I'm going to get up this wall is to ask for your help. Maybe that's the point of this whole exercise, so here's how it's going to go down. You're going to make me be able to reach two more inches, and I'm going to get up this wall. OK? Good talk! Thanks."*

Jessica is my daughter, and I shared this story because it seems to capture so well the internal conversations that we have inside our minds about what we think we need, what we will for ourselves, what we desire deep within our hearts.

Today, we are looking at Beloved Community as part of our sermon series called "Smashing Alabaster". Maybe your best Beloved Community is your family or your weekly support group or a small group of friends that you've known for years or maybe it is this congregation. For some of you it is the community that you are from or where you live now—maybe it is both.

Our scripture passage challenges the people of God to examine—not just for themselves—but for the community—the desires of our hearts and minds.

We need to ask what is it that we want? And why? What is the motivation—self? The other? Essentially, the question is about who benefits?

These questions are central to the work of every community to live into what it means to be Beloved Community...is it about me? Is it about Christ? Is it about all of us?

What do we Desire/Will/Want—THELO in the Greek.

THELO is used three times in today's passage

Herod is plotting (THELO) Your murder (verse 31)

Herod wants to kill

***How often I wanted (THELO) to gather in your children
as a hen gathers in her chicks under her wings,*** (Verse 34)

Jesus wants to gather

but you were not willing (THELO) to come to Me. (verse 34)

Jerusalem does not want to be gathered

A warning—for what desire/purpose is a key question?

To protect empire

To protect Jesus

To protect Jerusalem

An Everyday Question for us and for the church—who benefits? Who or what are we protecting? The fox or the hen? Empire or the Community

Herod wants to kill—the empire/authority/dominant power is threatened

Jesus wants to gather—motivation comes from Love's longing and a divine mandate

Jerusalem doesn't want to be gathered?? Why??

because empire ways are embedded in the religious systems too

Jesus longs for compassion
Power to heal/thrive and lift up
NOT TO HURT OR EXPLOIT
Fox=hurt, exploit
Hen=Heal, deliver, gather, protect

We must also long/want/desire/THELO healing and deliverance for the community
The Divine mandate is to heal and deliver not hurt/not exploit

Beloved Community defined
Excerpt from THE CHURCH CRACKED OPEN

*Beloved Community is the community animated by this non clinging, self-emptying, persistent love. It seeks wholeness and kindness, as the individual and the collective strive and sacrifice for the sake of the flourishing of the greater whole and for the end of all forms of domination and oppression that diminish the children of God. If I am constantly bowing to you and you are bowing to me-if I am truly your friend and you are mine-then we will both flourish.
If we join God in nourishing and fostering that mutual regard everywhere, God's creation could become a community of love.*

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There is something elemental and compelling about communities of people who help one another to grow into all that they were created to be. Where each person is as committed to the other's flourishing and to the flourishing of the whole. Where the members are willing to sacrifice their own comfort and even lives for the sake of the other and for the dream they share.

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Read the end of Jessica's story on the rock face.

Reminder of Jessica's prayer:

"OK God. So, I guess the only way I'm going to get up this wall is to ask for your help. Maybe that's the point of this whole exercise, so here's how it's going to go down.

You're going to make me be able to reach two more inches, and I'm going to get up this wall. OK? Good talk! Thanks."

I'm sure the prayer was a mix between a peptalk for herself as it was like a staff meeting with God. "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans." In either respect, her prayer was hollow. Maybe it even sounded better in her head, but at some level she knew that a true prayer doesn't dictate to God the goal, the plan, or the timeline. She wanted to be the hero of her own story. She wanted to do this on her own. She was focused on everyone's eyes on her.

What could she do? She was more than ten feet above the ground, but through some blood, some sweat, and some tears, she just wanted to get up that rock face. Maybe it was the silence from her friends below or from her Lord above, but finally she was struck by a deeper truth – she wasn't going to be able to do this on her own terms...she needed to look at the situation through the eyes of God.

And in that moment of resignation, when she became utterly dependent on something or someone other than herself, when she gave up her ego's desire but focused on a deeper desire or will of her heart within her, a friend reached up. Max was one of the few who had the height to help. He raised his palm like lifting your hands to praise the Lord and in his lifting, he provided just a 2 inch platform that extended the rock shelf where she clenched her toes inside her tennis shoe. It was just a small part of the palm of his hand, he wasn't trying to draw attention to himself, the motivation wasn't hubris, his ego was humble and meek, and the effort wasn't grandiose but just the right amount of selfless giving—it was the scaffolding that she needed to propel herself to the next fingerhold and scramble up the wall – tired, spent, humbled, cured, exhausted, yet rejuvenated and restored to her true self—that is, newly restored to a state of God reliant and aware of both the strength and grace of her God who answered her prayer in a way – not as she requested – but in a way perfectly redemptive and wonderful. And her friend made a simple gesture that brought blessing to another.

Beloved Community is when we work to help others flourish. This is true for our neighbor and the stranger, for our families, for our church families, for our communities, our nation, and the world.

At the heart of all that civilization has meant and developed is 'community' - the mutually cooperative and voluntary venture of man to assume a semblance of responsibility for his brother. **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

The Lord—through Max—gave Jessica a small lift from an otherwise insignificant character in her story – someone who was willing to reach out, or in this case up, within their own humility in order to help another FLOURISH—to find healing and thrive within a Beloved Community. We do this for one another by interrogating our actions, our motives, and our defaults...by asking who benefits and reconsidering flourishing ways to be Christ to one another.

Our goal is to create a beloved community," said Dr. King, "and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives. **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

We (each and all) are invited to be the hand to help in someone's life or to offer a word of encouragement or insight as we learn how to be Beloved Community.

We are invited to receive the words of wisdom from the Spirit who examines our hearts during this Lenten Season.

We are invited to hear the voice of love in our Scripture passage today and maybe even the words offered from your pastor.

We are invited to acknowledge that God is reaching out and up right now to offer Calvary Presbyterian Church—and every member of this Beloved Community—just a few inches for you to find your footing, mature and grow, and flourish.

This is the desire of God's heart for us. May it be the desire of our hearts as well.

Amen and Amen.

