

John Knox Presbytery Meeting
November 15, 2016
Sermon by Moderator Beverly Ruston

First Presbyterian Church in La Crosse has sent a medical mission team to Haiti ten times. We pack up all the clinic supplies, fly to Port-au-Prince, then truck our way to a remote village location, usually arriving late Sunday. Once at the site, we bed down and set up our clinic which typically runs from Monday through Thursday. Before beginning our journey home, our missionary trip organizers arrange for an R and R day on Friday.

On the occasion of our first trip in January of 2005, our R and R day was spent on the island of Isle y Vache, off Haiti's southwestern coast. As the boat that ferried us out to the island and back had neither the space nor the power to carry all of us at once, we had to make multiple trips. Another team member, Barb, and I chose to wait for the last trip, so we found ourselves sitting on the beach with one of our interpreters, Lucner. Lucner was a well-educated, articulate Haitian man, somewhere in his 40's. Lucner is a most memorable character who loves to sing, to tell stories, and to laugh. On that beach, the conversation drifted into a discussion of our religious beliefs. I'm not certain how we got there, perhaps Lucner asked what lead us to make this trip. After giving him an involved explanation of how our Christian faith prompts us to do such things, we asked Lucner about his faith. He responded with a single sentence. JESUS CHRIST SAVES MY LIFE FROM THE MAGIC OF THE WITCH DOCTORS! There it was. No mention of the Trinity, of the sacraments, of any particular creed. Yet, this clear statement of faith frees Lucner to live each day with joy and with the confidence that in his sometimes scary world, Jesus Christ does, indeed, save his life from the magic of the witch doctors.

Now we are much more sophisticated here in Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. In our statements of faith we tackle all sorts of theological mysteries—certainly they can't be distilled down to a single sentence. We don't talk about witch doctors or of magic. In fact, we are a bit uncomfortable talking about Satan or evil. We do have to acknowledge, however, that there is some bad stuff out there-- negative

forces that encourage prejudice, bigotry, greed, and injustice. These are our witch doctors' magic. These are the forces that would separate us from one another and from the love of God. And—do we have a Lucner-like faith strong enough to “save our lives” from these powers? What does such a faith look like in our communities?

In today's scripture, Jesus' understanding of faith challenges that of the Pharisees. Now I don't think the Pharisees, the religious scholars of their day, were particularly bad folks. They spent their lives trying to get it right—to understand the sacred texts and to codify the rules they found in them. They were trying to teach their Jewish followers how to live in accordance with the law as they interpreted it. The Pharisees were trying to save the lives of their people, as they certainly had clear and ample evidence in their history of the dire consequences that followed when the people of Israel strayed from the law. Heads rolled!

Modern theologians also have much to offer and I am so grateful. They help us to understand and interpret the Bible in meaningful ways. Only with their help have I managed to get anything from the Book of Revelations! I am grateful for that hard work. I truly love our creeds—well thought out and prayerfully written. I love that the Presbyterian Church encourages study and examination of Scripture and of theologians, past and present, in the development of our faith. So what's the problem?

For Jesus in today's Gospel, a problem arose when He responded to the practical needs of those in his presence, rather than the theological standards imposed by the Pharisees. Certainly, feeding the hungry and healing the sick were not things that the Pharisees taught against. But, sometimes, their heady theology and the rules they so carefully and studiously developed shielded them from mingling with the masses, where some folks are obviously sick and maimed and where bad things can happen. Jesus doesn't flaunt the law. Rather he goes out of the sanctuary and into territory where the rules have not yet been carved into stone, where things can get messy.

Now, there are certainly times when, if honest, I must confess to being a Pharisee. Those of you who know me well, know that the La Crosse River Marsh trails are

my open-air, prayer closet. That's where I head most mornings after reading the daily lectionary to meditate, contemplate, and pray. No phone, no earbuds—just me and the marsh. And, that's where you'll find me when I'm faced with a knotty problem or decision to work through. These marsh hours, thousands of them, are at the very core of my faith. They are not just helpful. They are necessary. So, when I began the process of writing this message, I, of course, went into the marsh. As I was walking that Sunday afternoon, deep in thought, I met a few bikers. I paid them no attention, until I heard someone call, "Hey". Still thinking he didn't mean me, I continued to ignore the interruption. Then, I heard again—loud and insistent, "Hey". Finally, I stopped, looked around and found a man who had been attending our church for the past few months. I didn't know his name—had never spoken with him. Honestly, I had looked for him after services, but he didn't hang around. He sat by himself, came and went by himself. But, that afternoon, after demanding my attention, he said, "I just wanted to introduce myself." We talked a few minutes, learned each other's names, shared a bit of our personal stories, then went our separate ways. Nothing earth shattering, but I nearly missed it—this opportunity for a connection—because I was so focused on the religion in my head I couldn't see Christ in the man right in front of me.

And, I guess I am slow learner, as I have yet another marsh incident to share. La Crosse has a significant number of homeless, some of whom have established an encampment near the river at the end of one of trails. Over the years I have met some of the regulars when I'm out on my jogs. They've become familiar to me and me to them. We exchange greetings, but the connection stops there. For years, I've wondered how I might engage them in something resembling a relationship. A couple weeks after the encounter above, I was out on my post-lectionary pondering and prayer, when I saw one of those familiar faces approaching. I waved and said, "Hi". Then, he did something unexpected. He held out a pink, rubber, wristband—probably found lying somewhere on the trail—and asked, "Want this?" I smiled and said, "No thanks", continuing on my way. Then it hit me. This was a Pharisee moment—I had just refused the offer of a gift, the gift of a connection for which I had been waiting. I just blew right by it. The Pharisee in me was in control that morning.

These are instances in which my theological musings, while perhaps not wrong, kept me from recognizing the opportunity, right in front of my face, to be in Christian fellowship. But there are other times when recognition isn't the problem. We see the broken places, but going into those places can be scary—scary and complicated. We recognize the need for healing when we see the profound hurt happening with gun violence, in camps crowded with desperate immigrants nobody wants, in incidents of racial injustice, or where folks battle with alcohol, drug, gambling or pornography additions that damage not only their bodies, but their families and relationships. We know these situations cry out for a response from the Christian community, but, how, when, and where do we engage?

We may even tell ourselves, "It's not a problem for me". Those broken places are in the cities or in the Middle East, another part of the country or of the world, not here. Well, I grew up in a small town in Iowa. Actually, that's an exaggeration—I grew up in the country in Iowa. So, I can testify to the fact that prejudice, bigotry, and violence can be found there. We may not have as many incidents of public confrontation, but that makes these places no less broken, no less in need of healing. We fool ourselves when we think—"so what if someone in my community (perhaps even someone in my own Presbyterian Church family) believes we are all better off keeping out migrants, non-Christians, non-whites, non-good country folk". Since none are exactly standing in line to move in, who's being hurt? These tumors of prejudice seem benign, so why ruffle everyone's feathers? Why make a fuss?

We are further tempted to distance ourselves, not just physically, but by seeking the comfort of a rule book—where is the Westminster catechism or the Book of Order when you need it--something that can outline the answers for us and tell us just how to proceed? Do we wade right in or do we keep quiet. Do we keep those potentially messy discussions on the back burner? After all, are they that urgent? Do we need to address them now, don't we have enough on our plates? Well, back to Luke's gospel, Jesus attended to the withered hand WHEN HE SAW IT. It wasn't the convenient time. After all, he was supposed to be worshipping with the rest of his people. Shouldn't he stick with that? The man's withered hand had probably been like that for a while, so why can't it wait 'til Monday

morning? I am again reminded of Lucner's simple, but powerful, faith. He doesn't distance himself from the magic of the witch doctors, nor does he wait for laws to protect him. (He'd be out of luck if he did, as the laws are pretty nebulous in Haiti.) Instead, he has complete trust that it is Jesus Christ who saves his life from the dangers that lurk in those places. Do we trust Jesus Christ enough to venture into those broken places with that kind of joy and confidence?

I will address just one of the many complicated circumstances that call for Christian love and healing. What do we do as ruling and teaching elders when a same-sex couple requests to be married in our church? Until a couple of years ago, we didn't have to enter that potentially messy place, a place where emotions run high and where someone may very well be hurt. Like the Pharisees in our Gospel, we had rules which permitted us to distance ourselves. After all, we were just following the rules, nothing personal. But what now? The Presbyterian Church USA has yanked that rule right out from under us—we are working without a net.

I'm reminded of an incident that occurred several years ago, while I was still actively employed. I was contacted by a newly hired administrator of a small health care facility. He was in the process of hiring social work staff and asked if I might prepare some interview questions for him to use—he didn't feel he had enough experience with social workers to know how to screen and hire them. So, no problem. I prepared a list of questions and sent them off. A short while later he contacted me again. The questions seem fine, he said, but could you send the answers?

So, in this circumstance—and, indeed in others—it's scary to open the conversation without the answer key. Not everything is covered in our Book of Order. We're not certain where the conversation will take us, but we are likely to find opposing and deeply held convictions. Folks may well get upset, hurt, or angry. Why go there and risk alienating folks? Or, is that all the more reason we are called to enter that place and to bring God's love and healing.

Going back to Luke's story, Jesus did indeed go right in, knowing full well that the Pharisees would likely find fault, that he would face criticism for defying tradition.

He went into that messy place because he saw the withered hand and it needed his healing. Of course, Jesus did have guidance—he did understand the Pharisees' code of conduct and he understood its importance. But he also understood that law does not and must not be an obstacle to showing God's love and healing power. When our manmade established codes, no matter how carefully constructed, stand in the way of loving God and showing love to our fellow men and women, we are placing our will above God's will for us. We are placing our trust in our own flawed understanding, rather than trusting in the Spirit's leading and the Gospel's example.

So now can we enter those broken places, not defying our church's traditions, but trusting in God's love and guidance, rather than in our rules? Do we have faith that Jesus Christ is in that place and that his spirit will give us all the power needed to bring healing to withered hands and hurting hearts?

Such trust takes practice and requires mindfulness. I know that I, for one, have sometimes let my theological headiness or my trepidation at entering messy places restrain that trust. Hey, it's scary out there and it takes a whole lot of trust to put ourselves out front the way Jesus did.

So, when we see these broken places, we are left with this question. Where do we place our trust? How strong is our faith? Do we have a faith to match Luther's? Can we go forth with joy and confidence into the troubling, broken places in our families, churches, and communities, KNOWING that the Lord Jesus Christ is there and his Spirit is sufficient to keep us "safe" in his love.