

“It’s not about you”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Jeremiah 1:4-10 and Luke 4:21-30

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Two weeks ago, as Jenna, Emerson, and I piled into our car and hit the road for a day’s long journey to family in Cincinnati, we were carefully watching the weather. A huge winter storm was barreling into Ohio and New York. Our concern was not helped by multiple large flashing signs on the highway, saying, “WINTER STORM! DO NOT TRAVEL!” I looked to Jenna and joked, “I wonder if that’s a sign from God.” Oh, little did we know...

We already had considered canceling our trip. I had gotten very sick two days earlier; you may remember my absence that Sunday morning (big thanks to Paul and Rob for filling in for me). Jenna followed suit shortly thereafter. Our Covid tests thankfully, however, came back negative, and our family assured us that they still wanted us to come. So, we hit the road: tired, with sore throats, runny noses, and headaches. We can do this, we told ourselves.

The ancient Greeks used to call that *hubris*, a word denoting exorbitant pride, which the gods took a particular fondness in smiting.

We never made it to Cincinnati that night. We ended up staying in a hotel, after inching along through hours of snow, icy roads, and a near miss with a car that spun out in front of us, skating across the road, like a ballerina doing a series of pirouettes. And it just got better from there: the dog threw up in the hotel room, Emerson was so wound up from the car ride he refused to sleep and thought it was fun to scream at our neighbors, and the next morning, after almost no sleep at all, I threw out my back and we blew out a tire on the road, having to be rescued by my dad and get the car towed. We remained sick for the rest of the week; Emerson was nervous sleeping in a different place and kept us up most nights; and we had a Covid exposure and feared we had endangered our unvaccinated three-year-old and my father with underlying vulnerabilities (though thankfully several negative tests confirmed we didn’t catch it).

Then, as we made our trek home on the following Sunday, guess what happened? Another winter storm!

God’s like: *I tried to tell you! I don’t know what could have been clearer than large flashing signs: “Do not travel!”*

But, for all our exhaustion and travails (and maybe stupidity), we’re still glad we did it. We got to be with family whom we hadn’t seen in many months. Beautiful moments of Emerson snuggling with his grandmother, or showing toy cars to my dad, or feeding stingrays with his cousins at the aquarium. We were together, a family. And it was worth it.

I just had to keep reminding myself, “Patrick, it’s not about you.” It wasn’t about my comfort. It was about family. And as those same ancient Greeks could tell you: family’s worth an odyssey or two.

Perhaps that’s what Jesus was trying to say all those years ago, and perhaps that’s what made the people so mad. He was telling them, “It’s not about you.”

The day starts out happy enough. Jesus has come to *his* people, the people he grew up with, who used to tousle his hair when he was a boy. They’re proud of the hometown boy who’s made it big, preaching and performing miracles. He’s just finished telling them how he’s going to give sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, good news to the poor, and the salvation of God’s people. They’re thrilled. Jesus is going to save them. They praise him.

And then, just like that [snap fingers], it all falls apart. Suddenly, they’re driving him out of town and trying to kill him. What happened?

Jesus happened. He knew they didn’t get it. All they heard was, “Oh, Jesus is here to do good things for us, to offer us (his family, his ‘inside’ crowd) a special place in the kingdom of God. He’s going to stay here and perform miracles for *us*. He’s going to be *our* private priest and savior.”

But Jesus is no one’s private savior.

Jesus looks them in the eye and says, “It’s not about you.” And to illustrate his point, he tells the story of God saving two people God wasn’t supposed to save, two people God wasn’t supposed to love.

He says that there were many widows in Israel in the time of the prophet Elijah, many people who needed help, but God sent Elijah only to one, and it wasn’t the person you’d expect; it wasn’t the one who made all the right sacrifices at the temple or prayed all the right prayers or did all the right things; it was a woman in a foreign land who had never for a day in her life believed in God.

Jesus says that there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, many sick people who needed healing, but God sent Elisha only to one, and again it wasn’t the person you’d expect; it was a Syrian general, a man who had invaded Israel, captured their people, even taken one of them as a slave. God healed an enemy.

It would be like me standing up here and saying, the kingdom of God doesn’t belong to good Presbyterians; it belongs to the person who crossed our border illegally, to the homeless person on the street, to the atheist whose trauma prevents faith, to the incarcerated drug dealer.

It might make you mad too. Might make me mad. What are we doing here if this isn’t for us?

So they run Jesus out of town. Luke describes them as boiling over with rage. All their faith, all their suffering, and Jesus dares to tell them that God’s blessings are going to the people they

dislike, the people they don't want to have anything to do with, the people they believe are their enemies. It's too much.

We need to be careful here. More careful than Jesus' listeners that day. Because when Jesus tells them, "It's not about you," he's not saying that God doesn't care about them, or that God's salvation isn't also for them. He's telling them that God's love is bigger than them. It includes everyone, even people they don't like.

I also think Jesus is trying to tell them something about the purpose of faith. If you were to ask Christians why they believe, many would say: "Why, for my salvation of course." They would talk about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and receiving the blessings of God. Faith for them is a hedge, separating the good from the bad, the believing from the unbelieving, the blessed from the unblessed. It's what makes them special.

Of course, many Christians have a simpler answer: "I come to church because I like the music, or it makes me feel comfortable, or that's where my friends are, or they have really good programs for my children."

But whatever the reason, they all boil down to what God (or the church) can do for us.

Jesus looks at us today, just as he once looked at his hometown people, and says: the purpose of your faith, your being here, isn't your comfort or even your salvation. It's not about you. It's about the love that moves *through* you. When Jesus is asked the greatest commandment, he says it's to love God and to love our neighbor.

Faith isn't about what you get; it's about what you give. It's about how God's love shapes you and remakes you to send you out as a disciple to return that love to God and share it with others.

It's what three of us from this church were trying to explain on Tuesday night at a school board meeting, where some members of our community want to ban the book *All Boys Aren't Blue*, a memoir speaking to the LGBTQ experience, particularly within communities of color. They say they want to ban the book because it has a few pages of sex in it. But what they don't understand is that it's not about them or their comfort; it's about the young person who feels completely alone in this world, who has no one to talk to, and who opens the pages of this book and for the first time in their life feels really seen. It's about seeing themselves represented in that book, their pain, their trauma, their joy, their love, and yes, their sexuality.

It's so easy to think that all this is about what God can do *for* you, when really it's about what God can do *through* you.

We don't come here for the good music, or the friends, or the beautiful stained window, or the excellent sermon, or even our salvation. If we did, we wouldn't be Christians. We would be consumers, shopping for the best experience.

We come here because God's trying to save this world, to break love into every corner of hate, to shore up all the fragments and make this humanity whole again—and God wants us to be a part of that.

It's not about you. It's about God and neighbor. Because our lives will only matter when theirs do too. **Amen.**