

First Presbyterian Church of Watertown

Mark 1.40-45

“Not a Keeper”

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I was reading a commentary of our passage this week and was struck by the conclusion of the scholar. After he navigated the leper's call and the terse rebuke and then the direction to tell no one, the matter of disobedience came up. The leper did the opposite of what Jesus told him to do. Jesus said, tell no one and he told everyone he could find.

When the scholar got to this point he referenced the call Jesus gave to the four fishermen/disciples: let us go and fish for people. He brought up this calling and said, you know when you go fishing you don't keep everything you catch. You throw some fish back. This fish, the leper, was one they would have wanted to throw back.

Nothing against New Testament scholars, but they tend to be dry as dirt. This comment: this was funny, witty. His take on the leper's disobedience was close to life. There are people we love without effort, without fuss or drama, and there are some people it is tough to love. They exhaust us, irritate us, or drive us nuts. And if we can, if we are not obligated by family or marriage or profession, if we can, we cut these folks loose. We toss them back into the lake of life.

There are lots of reasons for this. I can remember being a young boy and I had a step-grandmother who just didn't like the whole lot of us. When I would visit them, it was clear my presence was not to her liking. She would be very happy to throw me back into the lake. Listening to the sound of my breathing seemed like a task for her. As I saw her offer such limited joy to others, so I didn't take it too personal. She fed me and never struck me. But I can see the look in her eyes forty years later. Loving me was the last thing she wanted to do. She was obligated to endure me. I was a fish in her boat, so to speak, but I was not a keeper.

I was presented with such a person when I arrived at our first congregation. The day we came into town two older fellows were installing a fence. The only request we made during the negotiation of the terms of call was that a fence be built in the yard of the manse. We had three small children and a Labrador puppy. So it was timely that a fence was being built.

Yet the two men who were doing the work didn't ask us if the location was good; if the fence area was big enough; they didn't ask if an ugly chain link fence in the front of the house was what we hoped to see. They put up the fence as we unloaded all of our worldly goods. Once done, one of the men came over and said, "you wanted a fence. There is a fence." And he walked away.

This was Dwight. And this was Dwight. This was not only how he installed fences, this was how he did most things. He didn't ask anyone, didn't engage in pleasantries. He did what he did and you took it or you left it. A part of me was glad when I found out that everyone was upset about the fence. It was too small, it was ugly, and the gaps in the bottom were an easy path of freedom for the puppy. But I wasn't happy when I found out that not only was Dwight a regular attender who did many things without permission or consultation he was also the treasurer. My first conflict in ministry was arguing with Dwight. I explained in no uncertain terms that he signed the checks; he didn't have a veto vote about spending. He offered a very clear response: he didn't feel obligated to listen to pastors, especially young ones who had no idea what they were doing.

My first impression of Dwight was the same impression I held until he died a few years later: he was hard to love; he was someone many people tossed back in the lake. He was fine with that. Dwight had no confusion about how stubborn and belligerent he was. His wife loved him; his son loved him; he had friends. Everyone else could take him or leave him.

I will always count Dwight as a dear friend. While I was not as belligerent as Dwight, I was, much to his surprise, just as ornery. We would argue for an hour, neither one of us giving an inch, and then we would laugh. Dwight knew how to fix everything, he was a mechanic and a farmer. He loved that I would sit with him and watch because I was a historian masquerading as a preacher and I didn't know how to fix anything. I would watch him and then let him watch as I tried my hand. I was not nice to him and that meant the world to him. I did, though, do the hard work of loving him when his belligerence drove others away.

Dwight taught me a lot about roofing and plumbing, carpentry and heating. Yet, his greatest lesson for me was what he did for his wife as he died. When the doctors found his cancer it was beyond any treatment and they sent him home from the hospital with a few months to live. Yet, there was a strange twist to this. Dwight's wife Ruth was not so much upset by the cancer as she was by how Dwight was not fighting the cancer. He accepted the diagnosis. He went home to die. This undid Ruth. She could not accept his acceptance. She needed him to fight now as he had fought through life.

I will never forget sitting with Dwight and hearing, "I am going to take chemotherapy." His face was rock solid. He was going to give away any quality of life, any peace so Ruth would have peace when he died. And that is what he did and that is what happened.

The choice to love, to sacrifice, to offer compassion is a gift if we can see it. I know many have spoken in the last few weeks about the inspiration, the power we all felt watching Marilyn Adams in her life, in her choice not only to raise and love a special needs child, but to give her life away for all the special needs children of Watertown. It felt good to say that out loud, how much her gift and spirit of gentleness meant for this community. Watching her life, the choices she lived, was a great gift. The sacrifice Dwight made for Ruth as he died is close in many ways to the choices Marilyn made throughout her life. We are better people in seeing these choices.

Our passage today is unique in the notion of choice. The leper says, if you choose. And Jesus, I do choose. Jesus will ask others what they want him to do in terms of healing. Yet, this is the one moment where someone tells Jesus, this is your choice.

The other unique factor in our passage is the stern talking to Jesus gave to the man. On a few other occasions Jesus will speak sternly. When he told Peter to get behind him and called him Satan, I want to say he spoke sternly. Yet, this one is unique because it comes out of nowhere. The guy asks for help; Jesus helps him; and then he gives him a good talking to. As the commentator intimated about tossing fish back in, it may be that this person was not easy to love, not easy to work with. That he doesn't listen and does the opposite of what Jesus tells him is another clue for the upbraiding.

Yet, what means the most to me in this passage is that Jesus chose to heal someone who was hard to love. He helped someone who was frustrating; he gave his energy to someone many, most likely, would discard, toss back into the lake. In many ways the truth of this healing is not fully seen until the next one, where Jesus offers forgiveness of sins and asks, what is easier to heal the body or heal the soul?

In truth, both are hard. And what is hard in this passage is what we find when we try to love people who are not easy to love. There are people we love and never give a second thought to our love. It is effortless. And there are some people that demand, in essence, a choice. If we are going to love them, then it is our choice.

This choice is perhaps the most radical doctrine put forward by the Protestants 500 years ago. It is called the *priesthood of all believers*. Some take this doctrine to be the idea that all have a vocation. We are all called; we have different gifts, different roles, yet all have a call. This is good. But it is not the heart, not the radical component that changed the world.

What changed the world in the *priesthood of all believers* was that if I choose to forgive you, my forgiveness absolves you. And if you choose to forgive me, your forgiveness absolves me. Up until this point in the church, it was the priest alone who had this power. You needed to confess your sins to the priest, comply with his demands of penance, and then receive absolution from the priest. The Reformers, in essence, 500 years ago blew up the confessional booth. They said, we all have this power. We are a *priesthood of all believers*. If we choose, we can heal the soul.

Many have recounted recently the choice Marilyn Adams made as a young mother. She was told, it is your choice. You can send this child away or you can give your life away. That was the choice. We know the power of her choice. There is special education in Watertown, JRC, and special religious education because she made that choice.

What I took away from the terrible weeks with Dwight and his unnecessary chemotherapy was that love, loving people, is choosing to give your life away. And this is sometimes hard, painful. Sacrifice is a choice; tragedy is when there is no choice. But he chose to give up that last bit of time so to make the years Ruth would live after him free from doubt and confusion.

In our lives the choices to heal the soul are not always as poignant or powerful as the choices of Marilyn and Dwight. Someone has upset us and we choose a grudge instead of grace; we find our expectations are not met, so we ridicule or force others to become what we want. We choose belligerence instead of patience. This becomes justified when the person who offends, the person who bugs us, is not a keeper. No one blames us when we discard the disagreeable. No one would have judged me had I disliked Dwight. He was rough.

Yet, what we need to remember today is that we have the power to heal the soul. Our mercy, our grace, our forgiveness has power if we choose.

Again, for the most part our choices are easily made. We choose to love the son or daughter who is kind and respectful; we love them without thought or effort. We choose to love the brother or sister who guards our dignity and remembers our birthday; you may not remember when you actually chose love. It was just what you did. We have people in our lives it is easy to love so we may not even know the power of our love; it leaves us without fanfare or intention; it is effortless. Our priestly role, our grace, is like water flowing from a fount.

But then, there are some fish we would rather toss back in. The leper who got the stern talking to, not a keeper. The leper did the opposite of what he was told to do, not a keeper. This leper most likely has a name in your life, a time in your life, a moment where you had to choose: you can love or you can leave. Those are tough moments. I will never forget watching my step-grandmother chose not to love again and again. Sometimes we do not chose grace.

Jesus said, I chose. Sometimes we say, I don't chose.

This is our power. What the Reformers made so clear is that we each have this power. We choose to love; we choose not to love. Lots of reasons. Sometimes the choice to love, to forgive, to be kind is so natural, so effortless, so instinctive we don't even know we are choosing. And sometimes, the choice is all too clear. Remember, this is your power. You have the power to heal the soul. Not just me in the Geneva gown. You and me. No one takes our love; no one forces our forgiveness. It is ours. Jesus said, "I do chose." May we live the priesthood of all believers how Jesus lived his life. May the Reformation continue. *Reformata, semper reformanda! Chose grace. Semper gratia. Amen.*