

Restorative Love. Irrational Hope.

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

The story today that Sophia told focused on the second half of the lectionary reading today. The part we didn't hear was of Jesus inviting himself to dinner with the reviled tax collector, Matthew, a social pariah because people like him in ancient times tended to overcharge the peasants and pocket the difference. All the while, the religious leaders publicly seethe, witnessing Jesus eating with someone like that!

Jesus makes his way back onto the street, and a prominent leader from the synagogue pleads with him, his daughter dying. He pleads with Jesus to come and heal the girl, and declares his utter belief that Jesus can make her better.

Does he believe because he is desperate, rather like the quarterback in the Grey Cup final, 10 seconds left, throwing the "Hail Mary" long pass, hoping to get the touchdown? Does it matter, whether or not the father is desperate? It might be irrational, but can faith and restoration not come out of desperation? Absolutely.

I've had days like this one that Matthew describes in Jesus' life. Jesus agrees to go with the synagogue official, except, along the way he feels power flowing from him. Someone has touched him! Now, let me confess something to you, my friends. When I am in a hurry, I don't always notice subtle things like people touching my tunic, I guess that might be my shirt or jeans in modern language. In Jesus' situation, I might not have noticed that someone touched me, given the urgency of the moment. Not Jesus, though.

Jesus stops, seeks out the person who touched his clothes, a desperate woman, quite the opposite of status in the community of the synagogue official who was leading Jesus to his home. This woman would have lived on the fringes of community because of her condition causing her bleeding, in spiritual terms of the time, she was ritually impure. She thinks to herself, "If I touch him... I will be made well." "Made well", the Greek verb used for that, *sózó*, (pronounced: sode-zo) can also be translated as "being made well", "saved", "healed", or "rescued". She is *desperate*, and in that desperation, she flagrantly violates Jewish purity laws, and spiritually contaminating Jesus by touching him in the process.

The woman passionately believes that her risky action will heal her and restore her health and connection to the community again. And Jesus, noticing her, is not at all annoyed, in fact, speaks to her in a loving way that the onlookers would not have shared. He says to her, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." Jesus uses the same Greek verb, *sózó*, in this story. Her desperate act *has* saved her.

"Hail Mary" faith, indeed is faith, sometimes the best kind, because it doesn't allow for halfway measures. When we are irrational, we don't have a Plan B. We are *all in*. Haven't you and I had a time or two of desperation?

Ideally our heroism arises out of calm and rational thinking. Unfortunately, life doesn't work that way; the real acid test of faith is the risky moment in life where we feel urgency, even desperation. Running into the middle of traffic to save a child. Going to

visit an elderly neighbour who had COVID in the height of the pandemic, because there was no one else willing to expose themselves. Getting up some mornings feels like a risk!

Many of you have heard me talk about one of my favourite writers, Anne Lamott. She talks about desperation in her book *Small Victories: Spotting Improbable Moments of Grace*.¹ Soon after the 2001 horrific attack on the United States, there was paranoia across America, President Bush fomenting the fear into a pre-emptive attack on Iraq. Lamott recalls, in that time, how hopeless things felt. Terrorists crashed into the Twin Towers, presidents invaded helpless foreign nations without just cause, teenagers graffitied swastikas on park benches and bathroom stalls.

“How are we going to get through this craziness?” Anne asks her priest friend Tom. Tom’s reply, “Left foot, right foot, left foot, breathe.”

Lamott confesses that, though Father Tom and some of her more “spiritual” friends somehow appreciated the tribulations of wandering through desert times, she’d rather learn life’s difficult lessons from the air-conditioned comfort of a car or from a luxury resort.

After her conversation with Father Tom, Lamott prays for help, then goes grocery shopping. She is surprised as she wins a free ham! Not quite the answer to her prayers that she expected, and, lugging that big ham out the store, Lamott runs into an old friend who’s down on her luck and needs food.

“Do you and your kids like ham?” Lamott asks.

“We love it!” she replies.

As her friend drives away in tearful gratitude, Lamott realizes that, even in the driest desert, rain eventually arrives.² Isn’t faith like that, born out of a sense that there is no other option, no exit strategy. Reaching out for help, or to help someone else, from a casual sense of care, but from a place inside of you and me of conviction.

Time and again I come back to Barbara Brown Taylor’s book “An Altar in the World”, and her friend asking her, “What is saving your life today?” She says that what is saving her life each day is,

...the conviction that there is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experiences of human life on earth. [Her] life depends on engaging the most ordinary physical activities with the most exquisite attention [she] can give them.³

May our everyday actions be grounded in conviction, the utter belief that our actions, our attention, our decisions, will make a difference. Amen.

¹ *Small Victories: Spotting Improbable Moments of Grace*. “Ham of God” © 2014 by Anne Lamott. Penguin Group.

² This train of thought thanks to <https://asialenae.com>, 2019/08/28, “Anne Lamott on How to Find a Wellspring of Hope in a Desperate Desert of Despair.”

³ *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. (p. 15) Barbara Brown Taylor. © 2009 HarperOne.