

Sermon October 24 2021 Ashley, David, and Jennifer

*Our guest preacher for this day, Nedelka F. Prescod, an MDiv student at Yale Divinity School, was unexpectedly not able to be with us. And so the sermon was given by three people sitting in the congregation who each shared a part of their faith story with us.*

**SCRIPTURE: Mark 10:46-52**

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Jesus stood still and said, ‘Call him here.’ And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart; get up, he is calling you.’ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ The blind man said to him, ‘My teacher, let me see again.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your faith has made you well.’ Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

**SERMON: “Faith”**

**Ashley Collins (church member):**

When I was asked this morning if I had a story of faith, I looked inside to see what’s there. And it’s the place that I rest in faith most easily at this point. I am a massage therapist, and what it has become is this laboratory for faith, quite honestly. Early on in my career, I had a client come see me for 90 minutes of a deep therapeutic process that I was relatively new at, but I had the protocol. And in those days, about 20 years ago, 45 minutes was about all I could do, and then I would send you on your way, because it was really just about going through the protocol.

But I had this person for 90 minutes, so I was extremely thorough, knowing that something should deal with the issue that this person came to me with. And I didn’t get it, even though I was incredibly thorough. He had this pain in his toe that was a numbing, zinging sensation from a particular style of yoga that he had been practicing. And in my head, I was thinking I’d given him all I’ve got, and told him that hopefully he could go to somebody else tomorrow. But he said at the end of the session, “Well, you didn’t get it. But I like what you did, so I’m going to come back tomorrow.” And I thought to myself, oh my God, that’s not just 45 minutes, that’s another 90 minutes!

Well, he came to see me. And I sat there in a panic, because I thought I can’t do this kind of work again. I can’t do that type of thorough work. I did everything that I knew in the 90 minutes the day before. I just thought, okay, I know that every great student of God has said “Ask.” And I thought, well, I’ve got 90 minutes, and I really need help, because I just don’t know how to help this person any other way. It was really just throwing caution to the wind, because if you knew what kind of cynic I was when it came to things of the spirit, and God, and anything that could be attached to religion, my cynicism was much greater than going beyond 45 minutes.

So I sat there for a moment, and I said, “Okay, I need help.” And it hasn’t come to me this boldly since. But I got a flash on the left side of my face of this person’s body, and the point on his neck that would release the nerve pattern that was hitting that particular toe. So I hit that point on his neck, released the pattern, and then I still had 88 more minutes to go!

Fast forward 20 years later. The protocols and my skills have evolved. The protocols have become this safe container to sit back on. But now with the pandemic, my work has demanded that I work with people online. I finally started putting distance healing to use. That tells you how far some of my practices in faith have evolved. I can now put into language for myself and for my clients how to, really, act in faith and receive in faith.

People who are really in a delicate condition during these times still need the love and the care. I found out that a friend of mine was in active dying. So we worked with her, and it was an act of faith. And sure enough, my guidance to her is the same that I give to everyone, which is, if nothing else, just ask, and look for the evidence of a response.

I’m happy to say that I’m really grateful for this laboratory that I get to use every single day, putting my faith in the simple instruction which we have been given , which is just to ask.

**David Anderegg (church member):**

I’m going to tell you all a brief parable, and you can decide what it means. Many years ago, I was having a quite difficult time in my life. At that time, I would stop and pray during the day whenever I needed to. So this particular day, I was driving south from Williamstown toward Pittsfield. On Route 7 there are several turnoffs, waysides, up there. And since I have a practice of never praying while I’m driving, although country songs will tell you that you should, but I don’t, because I want to be able to focus completely on praying. So I do not pray while I am driving. Nor while I’m drinking, but that’s a different story!

In any case, I pulled off in one of these waysides to have a moment of prayer and to ask God for help. It was in September, and the leaves were still on the trees. I pulled off and got out of my car, and I knelt and prayed. I asked God for help. It was very unspecific, but it was quite urgent. And when I opened my eyes, I was covered with caterpillars. So this is the Parable of the Caterpillars.

I was covered with caterpillars. There were caterpillars hanging from the trees. There were caterpillars everywhere, those little tiny green caterpillars. And I burst out laughing, because I felt that God had sent me these caterpillars but had not told me how to interpret this message!

So there are several possible interpretations. One, pay attention to your surroundings. Because they might have been there when I stumbled out of the car, and I just didn’t see them. So perhaps pay attention to your surroundings. Two, perhaps God was saying I will send you a message and it’s your job to figure out what it means. But the interpretation I came up with is that God’s creation goes on whether you are miserable or not. And, you know, these caterpillars are perhaps just as happy or miserable as you. But they were quite beautiful. They were not creepy. They were quite beautiful hanging in the air, as well as covering my clothes.

So I will leave that story with you. You can decide how you want to interpret it. But I do have to say that I asked God for help and I got help. I laughed all the way home. Whatever urgent terrible feeling that prompted me to get out of the car was dispelled by the caterpillars. So whatever it meant, it worked.

And if you have any idea about how I can interpret the Parable of the Caterpillars, please let me know.

**Jennifer Williams (consultant for our church's capital campaign):**

Good morning, everyone. I'm Jennifer Williams, and I am visiting you today. I was here to work with your Steering Committee through the Feasibility Study process for the Capital Campaign. I'll share some information with you a little bit later about that.

But I thought that I would tell you a little bit more about myself through my own faith journey. And that's what I really think faith is. I think we're all on a journey. We're not born with faith. It changes over our lifetime. We're more faithful at some points in our life than we are at others. But we're all on our own journey. And it's okay to be so, on a journey in a different place than perhaps the person sitting next to you or across the pew.

I was born into the church. My dad is a Congregational minister, now retired. He served churches in Massachusetts his whole career. And my mom worked for the YMCA – the Young Men's *Christian* Association. And so heart-mind-spirit, body-mind-spirit, the Holy Trinity – all of it – that was the faith formation that I was born into.

And yet, the first time I had a choice about going to church or not, when I was in college, I didn't go, because I had a choice and I didn't have to, and I didn't. But then after I graduated from college, I found my own church, a place that was mine and just mine, not my father's church. And I started my faith journey at that point as an adult, with this wonderful basis in faith, but able to start my own journey. I joined that church, started having my kids, my family, and bringing my family to church. I served on boards and committees, and continued that faith journey.

It was about 20 years ago, when my mother retired from the YMCA and started bringing her work with fundraising to the churches she loved so much in the local area, that she invited me to join her. It was actually in my very first feasibility study that I participated in that I had a major milestone in my own faith journey. I heard such stories of love and devotion, of caring for church community and church family at that particular church we were working with at that time, that made me start to question if these folks feel so strongly about their faith and their church, why don't I feel this way? And that led me on a little bit of a journey of my own to discover that I wasn't in the right faith community for myself at that time, and I needed to make a change. It was a real pivotal moment.

But I would also encourage you all to remember that not only is faith a journey, but faith is the belief in something even without proof. Although I think it's human nature that we always look

for little signs of proof along the way, like those caterpillars. Now what was that? Was it just a signal of God saying “I’m here,” and that’s all we really need to know. We don’t need to know necessarily what the lesson was. But *somebody* was making it known that they heard you and they were there.

I’ve also had that experience in my life at a very low point. I was getting divorced, separating from my now ex-husband, going through all the angst of that. It was a particularly bad day. I was crying. The skies were crying. It was an incredible thunderstorm. I was driving through it, and it was so bad that I had to stop. I stopped at a place in Vermont where I knew there was no cell phone signal. You can’t ever get texts here, you can’t make calls. I couldn’t call anybody and say I’m okay or the rain is bad. I couldn’t reach out to anybody.

And yet, all of a sudden, my phone went off and I had a voicemail in this place where you can’t get a signal ever. I thought that’s strange, and I listened to the voicemail. It was a pastor, somebody I had met through two capital campaigns. He was an interim minister, so I had met him at his original church and then at another one along the way. I hadn’t talked to him in months. He had no idea I was getting divorced. He had no idea I was separated from my husband, or of how I was feeling at that time. And his voicemail said, “Hey Jen, I’m on a weeklong retreat, and I was in prayer, and I got this really strong message that I needed to reach out to you, and tell you that I was thinking about you right now, and to call you and tell you that I love you.” For me, this was a huge faith moment, to know there’s no message here other than “I am here.” And I believe that was another step on my faith journey.

And so sometimes – I’m going to bring this back around to fundraising because that’s what I do – sometimes you have to have faith. You have to have faith in your church family, faith in your leadership, faith that you can do amazing things, and faith that there is a system that works and you’re not in this alone. You’re not in this alone (*pointing up*). A little bit later we’ll have the opportunity to talk about that a little more.

Thank you for letting me share my faith journey with you today.