

MAKING THE BEST OF THE WORST

PENTECOST 25 PROPER 27

NOVEMBER 11, 2018

BECKY ROBBINS-PENNIMAN

CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD, DUNEDIN, FL

There are some stories in Scripture that really make me shake my head
and think, "That is just not believable."

It's not the miracle stories, like Naaman's healing, that are hard for me.
I've gotten old enough and seen enough that, for me,
each day is stuffed with amazing reminders and revelations
of how God is actively creating, redeeming, and sustaining life
every moment of every day
on this spinning blue marble floating silently in space.

The part of the story I find hard to swallow is about the young girl.

Consider: one day, she's living life in Israel with her mother and her father.

Armed soldiers suddenly sweep into her village, terrorizing them,
wreaking God knows what devastation. Soldiers grab her and drag her off.
She goes from normal life into slavery.

Now, that part is easy enough to believe; it's still happening today.

What's incredible is how this young girl then makes the best of the worst
and chooses – CHOOSES – to help the very general who ordered the raid.

Where is her sense of anger and revenge and hatred for her captor?

Evidently, she chooses not to live in that frame of mind.

Instead, she makes a naïve, almost irresponsible promise:

If the general will just go see the prophet in Samaria – Elisha –
the general would be healed.

Her suggesting Naaman go back into Israel is pretty close to treason!

Anyway, Naaman goes – only this time with gifts instead of weapons.

To be healed, Naaman has to get over his nationalistic pride
and wash in one of Israel's rivers instead of a better one in Aram.

Not only is Naaman healed, he is converted.

proclaiming the supremacy of Israel's God.

And it all began because a young girl whose name we'll never know
made the best of the worst and chose to help someone
she had every right to hate.

There's a second story we heard today that I wouldn't believe
except I've actually seen it happen in my own life.

Back in early 2007, at my last church down in Fort Myers,
we decided to begin a capital campaign,
which, given the looming Great Recession,
was not one of our brighter moves, but we didn't know that yet.

We were preparing a mailing with the pledge cards.

Walter, the other pastor, wrote a personal note to each parishioner.

He got to Sandy Burke's card and letter, and pulled it out of the stack.
Sandy was an older widow who struggled financially.

She had a secretarial job, but the company had told her the week before
that they were laying her off at the end of the month.

Today's Collect and Scripture readings are at the end of the sermon text.

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I don't know how many of you have had to look for a job when you're over 70,
but the prospects aren't rosy even in booming times.

So Walter decided to save her the embarrassment of having to say "no."
The next week, we mentioned that we'd sent out the cards
and would be receiving them and blessing them the following Sunday.

At coffee hour, Sandy went up to Walter and demanded,
loudly enough for a good number of us to hear, "Where's my pledge card? I didn't get one."
Walter said, softly so only Sandy could hear,

"Sandy, we know about your job. It's OK, you don't have to pledge."

Sandy teared up. Walter thought it was from gratitude.

No. It was hurt and anger. "How dare you?" she said emphatically,
quite loud enough for those of us nearby to hear.

"I love this church. It is my family. I know my gift will be small,
but will you take away my choice – without even asking me –
to do what I can to help our dream come true?"

Walter rocked back, stunned. Then he said to her, now so we could all hear,
"Sandy, until this very moment I never understood the story
of the widow giving money in the temple.

That widow wanted to do HER part for God.

She may have had only two cents, but she had those two cents,
and she chose to honor God with them. You want to do that, too."

No, Sandy's gift wasn't large, but even facing the loss of her job,
she made the best of the worst, giving what little she had
to help the people she loved and to honor her God.

This is Veteran's Day and the 100 year anniversary of the end of WWI

I may be an old hippie who won't even wear a *sgian dubh*,
that little dagger, in her sock when she wears her kilt,
but I am also an Air Force brat, and proud of it.

Dad enlisted in the Navy in 1946, eventually became an Air Force pilot,
and had a 27-year career in the military.

Like all veterans, he put his life on the line for the rest of us.

He went through hell in Southeast Asia to protect and defend our freedoms,
making the best of the worst.

As I look at the Gospel, the Good News of God in Christ,
making the best of the worst is our Christian path,
the Way that followers of Jesus are called to walk behind their Lord.

This story of the widow in the Temple takes place during Holy Week.

Jesus has already entered Jerusalem on the donkey
in the procession we know as Palm Sunday.

He has been in the Temple all day every day;
He has been teaching the ordinary people coming into the Temple
who are all getting ready for Passover on Friday.

But Jesus has also caused quite a ruckus;
on Monday he turned over the money lenders' tables,
and for the next couple of days he had a series of contentious debates
with scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and priests.

Just before we hear the widow's story,
the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and priests have all left the Temple
to go figure out how to get rid of this troublemaking rabbi from Nazareth.

Jesus knows his very worst day is coming,
when he literally will bear the sins of many people,
all those who are addicted to the forces of hatred, fear, and control.
Jesus makes the best of the worst, not by fighting those forces in like kind,
but by teaching, forgiving, and noticing a poor widow and her gift
The worst was truly terrible, and submitting to the crucifixion
was the hardest choice Jesus ever had to make.

But, it was only by exposing the impotence of death
that could he show us that eternal life cannot be contained by death,
and that love wins. Love always wins.

2,000 years later, the forces are still at work.

This Sunday our flags are at half mast again.

This month, only 11 days old violence has rained down
in a yoga studio, bars, and in street after street and home after home.
It seems like we hardly need bother raise our flags all the way up any more.

Not all the recent violence has been from a weapon;
the polarization and divisiveness of the last election cycle
were appalling and soul-killing assaults of anger, revenge, hatred, and fear.

As we are faced with choices on how we spend our lives,
how we use our resources, treat our neighbors, and care for our planet,
we need to do God's will on earth as it is done in heaven.

To do that, Christians follow Jesus, who made the best of the worst
by teaching, forgiving, noticing the invisible people and their gifts,
and by rising above the forces of hate and fear to love the unlovable.

If that is our Christian path, too, what's our first step?

Last month our presiding bishop, Michael Curry,
said our first step is to get back to basics, to focus on something so simple
a young girl can understand it, and a poor widow can be an example of it,
yet so all-encompassing that it will take our whole lives to do it.

The first step is a question we ask before every choice we face:

What would Jesus do?

Would he say what you're about to say?

Would he do what you're thinking of doing?

What would Jesus do?

The academics scoff and snark at this question as simplistic

But it's really where we must start our journey.

What would Jesus do?

Answer this thoughtfully, and your worst will still bring good,

and your best may even change the world, or change it for someone.

Just ask Naaman what that young slave girl did for him.

COLLECT OF THE DAY

O God, you show forth your almighty power chiefly by reaching out to us in mercy. Grant us the fullness of your grace, strengthen our trust in your promises, and bring all the world to share in the treasures that come through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

2 KINGS 5:1–15A

Naaman, a general for the king of Aram, was a great man and highly regarded by his master, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. This man was a mighty warrior, but he had a skin disease. Now Aramean raiding parties had gone out and captured a young girl from the land of Israel. She served Naaman's wife.

She said to her mistress, "I wish that my master could come before the prophet who lives in Samaria. He would cure him of his skin disease." So Naaman went and told his master what the young girl from the land of Israel had said.

Then Aram's king said, "Go ahead. I will send a letter to Israel's king."

So Naaman left. He took along ten kikkars of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. He brought the letter to Israel's king. It read, "Along with this letter I'm sending you my servant Naaman so you can cure him of his skin disease."

When the king of Israel read the letter, he ripped his clothes. He said, "What? Am I God to hand out death and life? But this king writes me, asking me to cure someone of his skin disease! You must realize that he wants to start a fight with me."

When Elisha the man of God heard that Israel's king had ripped his clothes, he sent word to the king: "Why did you rip your clothes? Let the man come to me. Then he'll know that there's a prophet in Israel."

Naaman arrived with his horses and chariots. He stopped at the door of Elisha's house. Elisha sent out a messenger who said, "Go and wash seven times in the Jordan River. Then your skin will be restored and become clean."

But Naaman went away in anger. He said, "I thought for sure that he'd come out, stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the bad spot, and cure the skin disease. Aren't the rivers in Damascus, the Abana and the Pharpar, better than all Israel's waters? Couldn't I wash in them and get clean?" So he turned away and proceeded to leave in anger.

Naaman's servants came up to him and spoke to him: "Our father, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, wouldn't you have done it? All he said to you was, 'Wash and become clean.'" So Naaman went down and bathed in the Jordan seven times, just as the man of God had said. His skin was restored like that of a young boy, and he became clean.

He returned to the man of God with all his attendants. He came and stood before Elisha, saying, "Now I know for certain that there's no God anywhere on earth except in Israel."

PSALM 24

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell therein.

For it is he who founded it upon the seas and made it firm upon the rivers of the deep.

"Who can ascend the hill of the LORD? and who can stand in his holy place?"

**"Those who have clean hands and a pure heart, who have not pledged themselves to falsehood,
nor sworn by what is a fraud.**

They shall receive a blessing from the LORD and a just reward from the God of their salvation."

Such is the generation of those who seek him, of those who seek your face, O God of Jacob.

Lift up your heads, O gates; lift them high, O everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.

"Who is this King of glory?" "The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle."

Lift up your heads, O gates; lift them high, O everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.

"Who is he, this King of glory?" "The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory."

HEBREWS 9:24–28

Christ didn't enter the holy place (which is a copy of the true holy place) made by human hands, but into heaven itself, so that he now appears in God's presence for us. He didn't enter to offer himself over and over again, like the high priest enters the earthly holy place every year with blood that isn't his. If that were so, then Jesus would have to suffer many times since the foundation of the world. Instead, he has now appeared once at the end of the ages to get rid of sin by sacrificing himself. People are destined to die once and then face judgment. In the

same way, Christ was also offered once to take on himself the sins of many people. He will appear a second time, not to take away sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

MARK 12:38–44

As he was teaching, Jesus said, “Watch out for the legal experts. They like to walk around in long robes. They want to be greeted with honor in the markets. They long for places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. They are the ones who cheat widows out of their homes, and to show off they say long prayers. They will be judged most harshly.”

Jesus sat across from the collection box for the temple treasury and observed how the crowd gave their money. Many rich people were throwing in lots of money. One poor widow came forward and put in two small copper coins worth a penny. Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I assure you that this poor widow has put in more than everyone who’s been putting money in the treasury. All of them are giving out of their spare change. But she from her hopeless poverty has given everything she had, even what she needed to live on.”

SERMON HYMN: *Take My Life, That I May Be*