

Seeking a Way into the Heart of It All

10/24/2021

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:

Mark 10:46–52

On Wednesday night the Church Council met in the Blue Room, and the church's President and moderator, Dorothy Waldt, had a task for us. She asked us to come prepared to speak about what it is that makes us passionate about church in general and about Glen Ridge Congregational Church in particular. And I had jotted down a couple of things, but I got lucky because we were going around in a circle, and I had chosen the seat that ended up going last. And that was lucky because I got to hear 15 or so other people speak ahead of me about not just their passions but about where and how their lives passionately intersect with church and with this congregation, with all of you. And as I heard them speaking, my little notes went out the window, and I realized I had a story to tell.

In 2014, a woman named Rebecca started coming to my church in the Boston area. She was different. She hadn't grown up going to church. She had never been a member of a church before. She didn't know what she believed or didn't believe. And her life was in a bit of a shambles. She was heartbroken because her girlfriend had dumped her. And she was feeling stuck in her career working as a chef at Whole Foods. She longed for something more.

Our congregation stepped up and met Rebecca where she was. She needed some folks to help pick her up off the floor. She needed some folks to talk to about God. She needed to feel like she was a part of something bigger. She would sit in sanctuary and cry the whole way through the service.

A year later in 2015 Rebecca's perspective on life was turning around. She had received God's extravagant welcome—a welcome of love, listening, and opportunity—and she had rebounded. She was in church every Sunday. And she was cooking for us and for people in need. And she was taking newbies under her wing and listening to them and hugging them while they wept their broken hearts out.

By 2017, Rebecca had become one of the church's deacons—the spiritual elders and caretakers of the church. Rebecca was widely recognized by folks young and old as an old soul, someone with great wisdom beyond her years and a loving spirit. And she met someone new at work. And she fell in love with and got engaged to this wonderful woman named Alexa who also started coming to church.

And Rebecca had heard God calling her to even bigger service. When some folks got together to open a new UCC church in our area—a dinner church that would worship on Wednesday nights, Rebecca became the church's founding Minister of Food, cooking for the worshippers who attended the meal every week. That summer Rebecca went to the UCC's national gathering called Synod and gave a presentation on her ministry that inspired the room. I'll never forget how her face glowed when she told me about the experience: "life-changing," she said.

After Synod she and Alexa went with her family out to Cape Cod for a well-deserved vacation. And early one morning riding a bike along the beach with Alexa, Rebecca's heart just stopped. And she was gone before she fell off the bike. Rebecca had been born with a congenital heart defect and she always knew that this was a possibility—that her heart might just give out, that she had a limited amount of time. And I ask myself, "What would have happened if the church had been there for Rebecca? How would the last two-and-a-half years of her life turned out if it hadn't been for the church?"

It's stories like Rebecca's that make me passionate for what church can be in the world. I think that church at it's best is a place where people who "get it" are reaching out into the world not for other people who already "get it," but for the people who desperately need it, for the people whose very lives depend on hearing a word of the Good News that we all are so accustomed to: *What is it that you*

would have me do for you? People whose suffering could be turned into wisdom with the right kind of care. People whose emptiness could be turned into service with the right kind of love. People whose loneliness could be turned into community with the right invitation. There's something marvelous about opening a door into the heart of it all to someone who's just opening their eyes to the fact that there *is* a heart of it all.

Traditionally, this has been known as “evangelization.” It's a word that carries a lot of baggage, I know, but if you pay attention to the Greek, you know it literally means “Good-News-ification.” Let's Good-News-ify our world. Not all evangelization is created equal—we all agree on that. And we don't have space here to get into the all the bad versions of it, but one thing that Rebecca's story shows us is that evangelization doesn't mean twisting someone's arm. Sometimes it just means preparing yourself to be the way by which God provides life-saving grace.

Because a story like Rebecca's also allows us to marvel at what the human heart responding to God's grace can accomplish. Did the church save Rebecca? No, Rebecca and God saved Rebecca, and church was the space, the community of saints and sinners, where that transformation and that deepening was able to happen. Because there's something marvelous about being invited into the heart of it all and realizing that the margins of life will no longer define your fate. You have a greater destiny! You're in the heart of it all now. Is that a common experience in this world? Finding a community that speaks from the heart and centers as primary the spiritual needs not of the first to arrive, but of the latest to arrive? I don't think so! But that's Jesus' church. That's Good News.

Some people roll their eyes at the idea of “church growth.” And I get it. Church growth is not always talked about in the healthiest or most noble of ways. But Rebecca was church growth. And what greater story of growth could you hope for? There's a deep and fundamentally Christian spiritual power in being a community that welcomes people in not just by being friendly, but by being ready. When the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep to find the 1 lost sheep? That's church growth! But do you see that that's a system? It takes effort. That's a ministry. It's a near-total orientation toward the lost. When the people who “get it” “get out there” for the people who “need it,” churches grow in numbers, and they deepen in spirit. It's not two different things. And so we listen: Where is the call for mercy coming from?

Charitable giving is fundamental to Christian identity, but sending money out should never be seen as an alternative to the other fundamental—bringing people in. There are some things that money can't fix that can only be mended by the kind of love and purpose and faith that is discovered in church—in the heart of it all. Our mission, as a church, flows in two directions: We welcome in those who need us, that process builds our reserves of treasure and our capacity for love, and then we send out what we have brought in. In, Out. What was one of the first acts of Jesus' ministry? Calling disciples in!

But maybe it was a mistake to begin by talking about other people who aren't here yet, because some

of you may be feeling like, “Well, hey what about me? I’m here, and I don’t always feel like I’m at “the heart of it all.” Sometimes I feel lost and lonely too in my socially distanced pew over here. Sometimes I want things to be different, to look different.”

But this really is most of all about you, about all of us who are already here. You want to know what the marvelous thing about welcoming people into the heart of it all is? If you’re welcoming someone else into the heart of it all, then you can feel pretty confident that you’re also right there centered and serving in the heart of it all. And you will feel that. A good host has spiritual power. One who serves knows the greatest part of life. It’s when we close the door—physically or emotionally—that we turn the beating heart of our center into a stagnant backwater, cut off from the vital life and desperate needs of the people who are closest to us. And then we start to feel lost, aloof, dissatisfied.

You may remember that two weeks ago I spoke to you about how and where we get stuck in the three acts of spiritual transformation. We spoke about the rich man who came to Jesus and asked what he had to do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus loved him and said, you lack one thing, go and sell everything you have, give the proceeds to the poor, then come and follow me. And that rich man went away grieving because he had many possessions. He felt as if something was missing in his life, he came to Jesus to ask for advice, but he was unable to let go, to take the necessary action to step into the heart of everything he thought he truly desired.

Where the rich man grieves, Bartimaeus rejoices. Bartimaeus is blind, a beggar, pushed to the margins of the crowd and of the community and of society by his disability and the prejudices of those around him. Listen to them trying to shut him up as he calls for mercy! But he calls out all the louder. And when Jesus tells the crowd to bring Bartimaeus forward, what does Bartimaeus do? If you blinked, you might have missed it. It’s a small detail, but it carries all the meaning. As he jumps up, Bartimaeus, blind and poor, throws aside his cloak. He throws aside his cloak. It’s probably the most valuable thing he owns—it’s his only piece of clothing besides the shirt he wears under it. It’s his coat, it’s his blanket, it’s his house. As a blind man in a crowd, he understands that once he throws that cloak away, he may never find it again. But Bartimaeus knows that Jesus Christ is the always open door into the heart of it all. And he runs to him without holding onto anything else.

Bartimaeus, like Rebecca, realizes that he has a part to play in finding his way into the heart of it all. Yes, grace has arrived. Yes, the door is open. And still, he has to make a fuss for himself. He has to cry for mercy. He has to ignore the angry shushing of the crowd. He has to let go of the past and move forward to make the request for healing.

Many of us may feel like Bartimaeus—marginalized in some way, especially right now. Where is the center in our world right now? Everything seems to be way out on the right and way out on the left! Where’s the center? Where’s the heart in our world right now? Where’s the common ground? The shared values and identity? Everything feels so broken and angry and sad. Where’s the heart?

Well, beloved, the heart is right here. And every one of us has a responsibility to ourselves to seek our way through the brokenness in our lives and world into the heart of God's community and love. Every one of us must decide, "Am I going to respond to the grace that is holding me up? Or am I just going to kinda hang here until my arms get tired?" And if the heart of this place truly is a heart worth having, then we'll support it and we'll share it. And if there was any question for us about our place in the heart of it all, this is the way to center ourselves again—not by holding on tight to what we want, but by opening up what God has given to us to the Rebeccas of the world.

Beloved, within five miles of this church, today, there are probably a dozen Rebeccas, heartbroken seekers searching for what they know not. Chances are good that they don't consider themselves to be Christian and that they haven't set foot in a church in many years, if ever. They may not even yet realize that they're waiting for an invitation. Do we know who our Rebeccas are? How do we reach her? How do we connect? Is searching for her a part of our mission? Is finding her a part of our ministry? How do we bring her in to the heart of it all?