

"A Pebble in My Shoe"

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Readings and Scripture:

"The assignment is to love the God you did not make up, with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and the second is like unto it, to love the neighbor you did not make up as if that person were your own strange and particular self. Do this, and the doing will teach you everything you need to know. Do this, and you will live." ~ *Barbara Brown Taylor, An Altar in the World*

from The Gospel of Mark, Chapter 2: 1-12 - A few days later, Jesus went back to Capernaum, and the news spread that he was at home. So many people came together that there was no room left in the house, not even out in front of the door.

Jesus was speaking the word to them, when four people came, carrying a paralyzed man. Because of the crowd, however, they could not get the man near Jesus. So they made a hole in the roof, right above the place where Jesus was. When they had made a big enough opening, they let down the mat on which the paralyzed man lay. Seeing how much faith they had, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Some teachers of the Law were sitting there thinking to themselves, "How does he dare to talk like this? God is the only one who can forgive sins."

At once Jesus perceived what they were thinking and said to them, "Why do you think such things? Is it easier to say to this paralyzed man, "Your sins are forgiven," or "Get up, pick up your mat, and walk." So I will prove it to you."

And Jesus said to the man, "I tell you then, stand up, pick up your mat and go home." While they all watched, the man got up, picked up his mat, and hurried away."

"To relate with others compassionately is a challenge. Really communicating to the heart and being there for someone else – our child, partner, spouse, parent, client, patient or the homeless woman on the street – means not shutting down on that person, which means, first of all, not shutting down on ourselves. ... Buddhist words such as compassion and emptiness don't mean much until we start cultivating our innate ability to simply be there with pain with an open heart and a willingness not to instantly try to get ground under our feet." ~ *Pema Chodron, When Things Fall Apart*

SPECIAL MUSIC – "By My Side" (from Godspell by Stephen Schwartz) – Salina Briseno Kiker and Noah Kaufman

Where are you going? Can you take me with you,
For my hand is cold and needs warmth. Where are you going?
Far beyond where the horizon lies and the land sinks into mellow blueness,
Oh please, take me with you. Let me skip the road with you. I can dare myself.
I'll put a pebble in my shoe and watch me walk. I can walk and walk! ...
We will talk, we will talk together, and when we both have had enough ...
Then I'll take your hand, finally glad, that you are here, by my side, by my side.

SERMON

Thank you, Salina and Noah. That is my favorite song from "Godspell." In this musical, the song is sung by the woman who plays the Mary Magdalene figure.

There are all sorts of interesting traditions, stories and myths about Mary Magdalene. When I was traveling in southern France a few years ago, I discovered that several towns near the Mediterranean coast had legends about Mary Magdalene arriving in that area boat after the crucifixion. We're familiar with Dan Brown's novel, *The DaVinci Code*, in which Mary Magdalene is portrayed as married to Jesus and having his child after his death. While these stories are intriguing, we will never know with real certainty who she was and or became of her.

But we do know that Mary Magdalene is the only woman, other than Jesus' mother Mary, who is mentioned by name in all four gospels. And that is significant, because the gospels were written and then canonized in a world where women were oppressed and isolated, and their roles were suppressed. A woman would not have been included by name in the gospels unless she was so well-known, so connected to the gospel stories, that she could not be excluded. Clearly Mary Magdalene was a woman who knew Jesus well, a woman who walked the roads of Galilee with Jesus during his years of public ministry, a dear friend and companion who was included in smaller gatherings with Jesus and the disciples. She is often identified as the woman who anointed Jesus with costly oil, a story told in various ways in the gospels.

So it's easy for me to imagine Mary Magdalene singing to Jesus, *"Take me with you, far beyond where the horizon lies, let me skip the road with you and I can walk and we will talk, glad that you are by my side."* Hold that image, because we will come back to Mary Magdalene in a bit.

Our Lenten theme, as you clearly know by now, is "Putting Flesh on the Bones of Faith." The spine, the backbone of my faith, is the Great Commandment, and I love the way Barbara Brown Taylor paraphrases it: *"Love the God you did not make up, with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and the second is like unto it, to love the neighbor you did not make up as if that person were your own strange and particular self."* I venture that we could all say we believe that we are called to love our neighbors as we love our own strange and particular selves. Our church Compact echoes this commandment by calling us to be personally involved with one another and to act in Christian concern for the welfare of all people. We hear this call again when we sing two of our favorite hymns: *"We will walk with each other, we will walk side by side and they'll know we're God's people by our love"* – and *"We are pilgrims on a journey, we are neighbors on the road. We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load."*

"Do this," says Barbara Brown Taylor, *"And the doing will teach you everything you need to know. Do this, and you will live."* She's right. Doing this is what puts flesh on the bones of our faith. And a great deal of the time, a great many of us in this congregation follow this call. And in following, we grow in faith, we are changed, and we do reshape some corner of the world and touch some people in our lives. It's all around us here at UCG: from housing homeless families, to feeding hungry children, to comforting someone who is grieving, to showing up for one another when it counts.

Yet it is also true, in the words of the poet T.S. Eliot, that sometimes in the gap between believing and doing, there falls the shadow. The believing is the bone, the doing is the flesh, and, oh my, therein can lie all the difference. Our Compact wisely inserts the words, *"even imperfectly"*, between *"following the way of Jesus"* and *"in personal involvement with each other."*

"Do this, and the doing will teach you everything you need to know." Sometimes when the doing teaches me things I may need to know, I learn things about myself that dwell in the land of shadow. This is precisely, for me, where the old words "the cost of discipleship" really take on flesh. Our United Church of Christ statement of faith reads, *"God, you call us into your church to accept the joy and the cost of discipleship."* Most of the time here, we celebrate the joys of being part of a spiritual community. Yet, as a minister, as a woman, as a mother, as a friend, as a spiritual companion, every day I grapple with and learn from the tension between a healthy love of self and an equally healthy loving involvement with others.

Three things I've learned over the years help me bear this tension. The first learning is summed up in the song "By My Side". *"I'll put a pebble in my shoe,"* she sings, *"and I will walk with you."* What does that mean, to put a pebble in my shoe? Have you ever been hiking up a mountain trail and you know there's this little pebble in your hiking boot and you can't find it, you can't get it out of your boot, but you can't ignore it. That pebble just bothers you; it rubs and rubs until it hurts, and yet you keep on going on the trail in spite of the discomfort, because you want to, because you know you have to.

Whether it's our parent, our child, our partner, our friend, our colleague, or the stranger we reach out to, relationships always involve moments when we decide to keep going on with, and often in spite of, that pebble that we carry in our own shoe while we walk together. The longer the relationship we have with someone, the more we experience those pebbles, the flaws in each other and in the relationship. Whether it's family, friendships, colleagues or organizations, long term loyalty in any relationship is like walking with that pebble lodged in our shoe.

Every person here who has chosen to walk the journey with someone who is seriously ill, who is grieving a loss, who has been abandoned or abused; everyone here who has gone through the death or dying of a friend or loved one, knows not only the blessings, but also the pain, the personal cost, of that making that journey. Sometimes we are able to choose that journey, as many of us did in the past year with Debby Harris during her illness and death. Sometimes we have no choice. I find myself on that path now with my mother, who is 90 years old, as she journeys through aging and the gradual loss of her memory. There is always blessing and meaning in the journey; and there is always also a cost, that pebble in the shoe. In order to be credible to me, any outreach venture, any church, any sermon has to level with me about the cost of loving one another. One of the things I love about the Bible is its honesty about the messiness of being alive and being involved with one another: check out the stories of Jacob and Rachel, Leah, David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, Jesus' disciples, and Paul's letters. We cannot pretend that we can love one another without at times having to carry that pebble in our shoe.

My second learning is embedded in the Gospel story of the paralyzed man. Here's Jesus, back home again, and in my version of the story, he's looking forward to some down time. But word gets out that he's there and people flock to his house, so he starts talking and teaching the word. Soon there are so many people in the house that you can't even get in or out of the front door.

Who shows up? Four people carrying a paralyzed man who is on a mat, something like a stretcher. I picture each one of them holding a corner of the stretcher, trying to bring their friend to Jesus, to a place of blessing and healing. But there's no way they can get to Jesus through that crowd. So what do they do? Shrug their shoulders and go home? Wait and wait until the crowd is gone? Nope, they climb up on the roof! The roof! Mark says they break a hole in the roof and let the man down through the opening. Imagine what that looked like to the people below! And Jesus is so impressed by the faith of these four stretcher-bearers, that he says to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

We could get into a big debate right now about sins and forgiveness and what does that have to do with being paralyzed, but I think that's another sermon. For the moment, let me just note that, in my experience in pastoral counseling, the need to be forgiven or to forgive oneself can be a major contributor to paralysis in one's life.

What strikes me in this story today is the image of the four friends. They each carry one corner of the man's mat. They bring their friend for healing and blessing, using every ounce of their perseverance and imagination to get him where he needs to be, even cutting a hole in someone else's roof. Notice that none of his friends could do have gotten that man there alone. Also notice that his friends are not responsible for his actual healing.

When we are involved in being a neighbor to someone in need, it's important to remember that we don't have to do it alone. It takes four people to carry a stretcher. I've mentioned before how Larry, his sisters, Jane and Jean, and I called ourselves "Team Alberta" when Larry's mother, Alberta, was dying. We were the team of four who carried her through those months, opening the doors and the space for her care. It took all four of us and we learned to value each other's particular role and gifts. We do this kind of love as a church community, when babies are born, when someone is ill or dying – and we do it together as part of the team of care. And now with a church of six hundred seventy five members, Larry, Andy, Vince and I are serving our calling in pastoral care for this congregation, by being a team, each of us holding up our part. Every example I've given involves being part of a team, which means a certain giving up of our need to be individually needed in return for being able to better meet the needs of the person involved.

Third, Pema Chodron reminds us that *"being there for someone else means not shutting down on that person, which means, first of all, not shutting down on ourselves."* To sit with a young woman who just received a diagnosis of brain cancer, with a father whose child has died, with a woman whose husband just abandoned her, with a man who has lost his job, means to be there, to be present, to listen, to hold the pain with that person. It means that I resist my need to offer solutions or reasons. It

means that I resist my need for solace, for closure; that I remember at every moment that it's not about me.

After my father died, and I stayed with my mother for several weeks to help her with what seemed at the time to be insurmountable tasks, the words I repeated over and over again to myself were to be a non-anxious presence on whom she could bounce her grief, her fears, her anxiety without my escalating or ricocheting that anxiety back on her.

So let's bring back Mary Magdalene at this point. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, the week which ends with Jesus' crucifixion. The Gospels tell us that "There were women looking on, at the cross, among them, Mary Magdalene. These women had followed Jesus and had provided for him when he was in Galilee." These women, and Mary Magdalene by name, are mentioned in every Gospel. Spend just a moment now imagining these women, standing there near the cross, being there with Jesus through these intolerable hours of his death, standing there, helpless to change what is happening, yet not running, not shutting down.

These women embody what it means to love one another, for not only are they there for Jesus, they are there for each other. I imagine that they are able to be there and stay there precisely because of one another. They are witnesses to Jesus' life and to his ministry, and ultimately witnesses to the most difficult moments of his death, and they bear it with him, so that he is not alone. It is the cost, and also the privilege, of discipleship, of love. And because they were able to be witnesses, we have their story; through their witness, the story of Jesus' death was kept alive.

And, my friends, when you hear the story of Easter Sunday this year, pay special attention to these women. They are the first to see the resurrection, the first to hear the good news that there is meaning, that there is hope, that there is life beyond pain, beyond the worst possible times, beyond death itself. That, I believe, is the true blessing of loving our neighbor as ourselves; in some way, walking that path always allows the light of grace, the rebirth of life, the hope of resurrection to shine in our own lives as well. *"Do this, and you will live."*

In the Gospel of Mary, one of the Gnostic Gospels discovered in a jar in a cave in 1945, Mary Magdalene greets the disciples after Jesus' death and says, *"Do not weep! Do not be distressed or let your hearts be irresolute, for our Lord's grace will be with you and will shelter you, for he has joined us together and made us true human beings."*

Reprise – "By My Side"

Prayer –

O God of this bittersweet season of Lent's questions and Easter's coming promise, we open our hearts to you this morning.

We pray to be each, and together, a band of spiritual companions who can carry and comfort one another in times of need, to be there for a neighbor.

We pray for the strength to endure that pebble in the shoe of our particular journey in caring for someone close to us or in serving those who are hungry, poor, lost.

We pray for the wisdom to remember that we do not need to walk this path all alone. Help us reach out, help us connect, with others who will be there for us as we carry our own burdens.

We pray that the blessings of loving and learning, of sharing and doing, will be palpable in our lives and in our hearts.

O God of this magical day, when the hours of night and day are equal, when the whole earth is briefly in balance, when we know that spring is truly here, may we, like the azalea buds blink ourselves open, be present to the sunshine and the rain, and blossom in full color, loving ourselves as we love our neighbors.

Ground us in the faith that your grace is with us, your grace will shelter us, for you have joined us together and made us true human beings."

Amen. Blessed be.

BENEDICTION

In the name of the Spirit, go:

see one another,

hear one another,

care for one another,

pray for one another.

It's that simple! It's that hard!

In the name of the Spirit, go with God!