

The Rev. Ann R. Lougee
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"Them and Us, and Wheelbarrows"
Matthew 15:21-28

In his best-selling book, Lake Wobegon Days, Garrison Keeler claims that he grew up in that mythical town, where everyone was either a Lutheran or a Catholic. Everyone, that is, except his family, who were "Sanctified Brethren," a church that he describes as "so small that nobody knew about it but the members and God." When other children asked what religion he belonged to, he just said, "Protestant," because being a member of the Sanctified Brethren was too much to explain. It was, he said, "sort of like having six toes. You would rather keep your shoes on."

The boy from Lake Wobegon discovered early in life, in a rather benign way, that folks tend to put themselves into different categories of "them" and "us." We are all divided up into Catholics and Protestants, and then the Protestants are further divided into many different denominations and independent churches.

Fortunately, some churches do get along with each other. The Disciples of Christ, of which this church is a part, and the United Church of Christ, of which Pilgrim Congregational Church from which I retired is a part, are one example. These two denominations share their Global Ministries and other work and also have a goodly number of blended congregations. The two denominations were in conversation for decades about whether or not to merge, but finally decided that they wanted to keep their separate traditions about some things, so instead of merging they became partner denominations.

The two communions recognize each other's clergy's ordinations and, way back in the early 1990's, Steve Kindle, from the Disciples, and I, from the United Church of Christ or UCC, were either the first Northern California clergy to complete a course of study and receive dual ordination status, so we could serve churches of either denomination. Unhappily, though, this collaborative, collegial model is not the norm among denominations, many of whom still demonize each other and claim the one and only truth only for themselves.

And that's just among the folks who call themselves Christian, looking at other Christians, not to mention the world's other religions. Sadly, some people also put up walls to divide "us" Christians, whom they consider to be God's people, from "them," meaning Jews, Muslims, and everyone else, whom they want to consider, if not outcasts, at least not God's favorites. Many, unfortunately, do the same with race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, wealth and social status, and God knows what else. Such boundary-drawing gets so ridiculous that Ellen DeGeneres famously quipped, "Can't we just love everybody and *judge* them by the *car* they drive?"

In preceding chapters of this gospel, the unknown author whom tradition has named Matthew has given several instances of, and cautions about, people's attempting to define for themselves who is in and who is out of God's family. Just before today's reading, Jesus has been embroiled in a controversy with the scribes and Pharisees, concerning the traditions by which they attempted to decide who was acceptable to God and who was not, who was "clean" and who was "unclean." Jesus asserted that externals cannot make a person unclean, but only what is in the heart.

uncovering humor in the Bible, envisioned Jesus, not so much changing his mind, but setting the disciples up to be his straight men, his fall guys, using the situation as a teachable moment.

They have previously demonstrated that they haven't understood that God's mercy and compassion cannot be limited by the boundaries that human beings draw between "them" and "us." So Jesus waits to see what their response to this Gentile woman's calling out to him will be. When their response is "Send her away," he speaks to her with harsh words, perhaps accompanied by winks and elbow jabs: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (jab, jab, wink, "right, guys?") "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (jab, jab, wink, "right, guys?")

By acting out the obnoxious extreme of their position, in response to an a worried mother's desperate attempt to get help for her sick child, Jesus shocks them into a new awareness. It's one thing to have an idea in the abstract, and quite another to be faced with a real person's, in the flesh, desperate situation.

As this mother persists in pleading for her child, the disciples are confronted with what boundary-drawing really means in actual human terms. So when Jesus finally says, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish," the bystander disciples' relief is probably only slightly less than hers.

Why, do you suppose, is it such an inhumanly human tendency to draw boundaries between "them" and "us?" Some of it, of course, is out of ignorance and prejudice and fear about other people, people we don't know, people different from ourselves. There can hardly be a better definition of sin.

Some of our behavior seems also to be from a jealous desire to think of ourselves and people just like us as God's favorites, as if God might not have enough love to go around. If we accept that God *is* love, this thinking is absurd.

Matthew attempts to reassure Jewish Christians that God's call and God's gifts to them are not revoked or diminished by admitting non-Jews into the church, by offering a salvation that is for everyone. This is consistent with Matthew's so-called infancy narrative, his story of "wise men from the East," Gentiles, non-Jews, bringing gifts to the baby Jesus.

It's also consistent with the editorial addition to the end of Matthew, commanding the disciples to go to the ends of the earth, preaching the good news, the gospel, of Jesus. That's what the word "gospel" means, you know, good news, from the Greek word euangelion, from which we get our word "evangelism." It's supposed to be good news – not just for some, but for everyone.

During the opening worship of this summer's General Synod of the United Church of Christ, the Rev. Traci Blackmon, Executive for Justice and Witness Ministries, shared the story of Charles Blondin, a famous French tightrope walker in the late 19th century. Charles was the first person to cross a tightrope stretched 11,000 feet over Niagara Falls.

People came from all over to witness this feat, which he did several times. One time he did it in a sack. Another time on stilts. A third time on a bicycle. He crossed in the dark and he crossed blindfolded. On one of his trips he carried a stove and cooked an omelet halfway across.

I've been thinking about wheelbarrows. For some of them, I can honestly say I'm willing to jump in. For others, I'm doing my best to trust and raise my hand to answer God's call. And, there are quite a few wheelbarrows that I'm willing to stick my toe in but not quite ready to fully commit.

A Facebook posting this week by the writer Anne Lamott seems to address my hesitations:

One more question: how do we get to hope in these dark ratty days?

We don't think our way to hope. We take the actions, and then the insight follows. The insight is that hope springs from awareness of love, immersion in love, commitment to love.

This begins with radical self love: to save the world, make yourself a lovely cup of tea. Put lotion on your jiggy thighs, clean sheets on the bed, the most forgiving pants you own. On the possibly last day on earth, you do not want to be wearing pants that pinch or tug, or ride up your crack. Trust me on this.

Radical self-love means you treat yourself the same way you would treat your favorite cousin, or even cranky old mealy-mouthed me. Watch the self-talk. You would probably use a sweeter tone of voice with the cousin or me than you would with yourself. This will change the world.

Get outside, even just to the front porch, and look up into the sky and into the tree tops, and say the great praise-prayer: WOW. Listen for the sound of birds--or bird. Surely there is one lousy bird somewhere in the vicinity. Close your eyes and really listen. If birdsong was the ONLY proof we have that there is a bigger deeper reality that transcends what we are seeing on the news, it would be enough for me. Eyes closed, breathe, listen: secret of life.

And lastly, take care of the poor--right now. In *Hallelujah Anyway*, I wrote that when I got sober, I was taught that happiness lay in going from big shot to servant.

If you want to feel loving feelings, which is hope, do loving things. Send a donation to a group that feeds and shelters and clothes people, in your neighborhood, or in Syria. Don't tell yourself you have no money to give--pack up clothes and shoes to take to a shelter. Or cash in the money in your laundry room change cup, and give it. Give away three dollars to moms on the street with kids, and give the kids colored pencils and journals, or index cards, and say, "It is good to see you," even if you have tiny judgment issues involving bootstraps and combed hair.

If you have time, register a few voters. Also, maybe a ten minute nap--the writer Robyn Posin says rest is a spiritual act. Father Tom Weston urges, "Left foot, right foot, left foot, breathe." Ram Dass tells us that ultimately, we are all just walking each other home. Let's get started.