

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

November 10, 2024, The 25th Sunday After Pentecost, The 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Micah 6:6-8, Philippians 4:1, 4-9

THESE DAYS, CHAPTER 13

Over the past 20 years I've preached twelve chapters of what has become my life-long sermon series. Each time I've preached from the "These Days" series. Some of you have asked for the next chapter. I realized this week that it had been about three years since the last installment, so today's sermon is "These Days, Chapter 13."

This morning, I plan to once again borrow the format of Alice Walker's poem "These Days" from her book of poetry entitled Horses Make A Landscape Look More Beautiful. You may know Alice Walker as the author of the book The Color Purple.

The introductory sentences and the refrain are Alice Walker's, the people I will share with you today are people who have shaped my own journey of life and faith.

THESE DAYS I THINK OF HOWARD who was in the seventh grade when I was a youth pastor on the Oregon Coast for a summer back in college. His clothes never fit him quite right. He was either outgrowing what he was wearing and his wrists and ankles hung out of his clothes, or he was wearing hand-me-downs and you couldn't see his hands and his pants were rolled into bulky cuffs that hung above his scuffed tennis shoes. None of which went unnoticed by the other teenagers. Howard was so thin, and was shorter than anyone else in the youth group which no one ever let him forget. He was very shy and didn't blend very well with the other kids, or better to say they didn't let him blend in. As is true for many jr. high youth groups, the group didn't accept him because, in their eyes, he just wasn't like them.

Howard was the one who ate candy and popcorn and hotdogs the whole time we were at the Roller Skating Rink in Salem, OR, an hour and a half from the small town we lived in. And Howard was the one who got incredibly sick to his stomach on the drive home as the old VW Bus took all the windy roads back to the coast. So, Howard and I spent several minutes at the side of the road, while he got rid of all the candy, popcorn and hotdogs, while all the other kids pressed their faces against the windows at the back of the bus. This did not help his social standing at all, although it did provide graphic conversation for the rest of the way home. Howard didn't hear it. He was sound asleep in the front seat.

But Howard didn't give up. He kept coming to youth group, even if the adults were the only ones who would talk to him, and appreciate him. Howard had fun at our activities, even if no one was really including him, no matter how hard the leaders tried.

And then came the fateful overnight camping trip with five leaders and 20 jr. highers. We hiked about three miles down into the woods and set up camp on a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Someone sent Howard and a few other kids to go dig the latrine, and all the kids went along. The pit for the latrine was almost finished when Howard got too close to the edge and pitched head first into the deep hole that had just been dug. The kids said all you could see of Howard were his legs from below the knees wildly waving in the air. The rest of him was face-first in the dirt, arms wedged tight, with no way to push himself out of the pit.

And this was the wonderful turning point in Howard's life!

The other kids pulled him out of the hole, helped him dust himself off, got the dirt out of his hair, and came back into camp with their arms around his shoulders. They told the story to all the adults, and laughed with Howard who had suddenly become quite vocal. That night at the campfire it was a fight among the girls over who got to sit by Howard. And when we spread out our sleeping bags the boys made sure Howard was safe in the middle of all their sleeping bags.

Somehow by falling head first into a deep pit Howard had become a hero. The rest of the summer he was just one of the group. He was just as loud and boisterous as the rest of the kids. And at least once every time we met, someone would start the story... "Remember that time Howard fell into the latrine," and then all the kids would fall on each other laughing, Howard the loudest of all.

**SURELY THE EARTH CAN BE SAVED FOR HOWARD,
AND FOR ALL THE MISFITS
WHO FIND THEIR WAY INTO OUR HEARTS
BY BEING THEMSELVES.**

THESE DAYS I THINK OF A MAN I'LL CALL OMAR Omar was a cherished friend of Ibrahim who was a Syrian man who was a member of the first church I served. Back in 1993 Ibrahim and his wife Barb took 8 of us from the church on an amazing 3 week tour in Syria and Turkey. Ibrahim had attended a private High School in Aleppo, Syria and had gone to school with many of the men who were national leaders in Syria, including President Assad, as well as Assad's brother whom we met at a formal dinner one night in Aleppo. I've always been thankful that Ibrahim went home to Heaven and didn't have to see the atrocities of the later Assad regime, but that is a story for another day.

Omar was the leader of the Kurdish peoples in eastern Syria and Turkey. As the leader of an ethnic minority in that region he had seen many atrocities and had in fact been imprisoned and tortured by his own government during Kurdish uprisings. He was a strong man of many sorrows. His body bore the scars of his imprisonment, and deep devotion to the Kurdish peoples.

While we were in Aleppo, Omar and his wife invited us to come to a dinner in their home. But given his political activism, he lived in a 5 story concrete apartment complex that was well guarded. We were met at the door by two very tall and strong men who escorted us into the building, and up to the elevator that was very small, only holding 2 people at a time for security reasons. Needless to say, 8 of the 10 of us were pretty anxious about meeting Omar because of what an important person he was, and all that he had suffered and accomplished for his people.

All of that anxiety disappeared as soon as we entered his home and his huge smile and abundant welcome greeted us, and made us feel like we had been friends forever. He kept thanking us for coming all the way from America to be with him and his family. As he sat with us in the living room before supper his very young grandchildren kept climbing up into his lap to be tickled and hugged by Papa Omar. He and Ibrahim kept us laughing with their stories of high school pranks and their 40 years of friendship.

His daughters had been preparing the meal for three days. If you have ever experienced the hospitality of a Middle Eastern family then you will know how lavish that meal was, and what an abundance of food there was. Another 20 people could have been fed by that meal.

That joyful meal was so much like other meals that Ibrahim's friends and family provided for us

through our visit, until you really looked into Omar's face. I will never forget the haunted, hurting, strong man I saw in his eyes. I have rarely seen so much sorrow and determination in one person's face.

It is his generational sorrow that has stayed with me.

That meal was such a contradiction of great joy and deep brokenness and firm resolve in the face of a man who would do anything to protect his Kurdish brothers and sisters seeking independence.

**SURELY THE EARTH CAN BE SAVED FOR OMAR
AND ALL THOSE WHO SEEK JUSTICE
FOR THEIR OPPRESSED BROTHERS AND SISTERS.**

THESE DAYS I THINK OF A 9 YEAR OLD GIRL NAMED KENDRA, who attended one of the funerals I performed at a previous church.

Kendra's grampa had died and she was attending her first funeral and her first funeral for someone she loved a lot. Throughout the whole service Kendra wept loudly to the point of hiccup sobbing.

Sadness was rolling off of Kendra like her flood of tears.

It was like she was wailing for herself, and all the adults who were trying not to cry.

During the service she climbed from lap to lap getting hugs and love from her family all around her. As she moved on to the next lap she'd leave a weeping adult in her wake.

After the service at the luncheon, Kendra came up and asked if I was the lady who'd been talking. When I said yes, she said: "I cried the whole time, did you hear me?" I told her yes and that it was OK to cry, but she immediately contradicted me and said: "My Grampa used to say: 'tears never changed anything.'" Yes, I said, but sometimes you're just so sad you have to cry, especially when you're saying goodbye to someone you love.

Later, we were sitting at one of the tables by the picture board and Kendra showed me a picture of her Grampa holding a baby. "That's me," she said, "that was nine years ago." And then she continued to talk her feelings about crying, and her grampa being dead. I asked her if this was the first dead person she had ever seen. She said, "Yeah and someone told me to touch him and I said no I was scared. But then I reached out my finger and I touched Grampa's sleeve. Then I wasn't afraid anymore." 'Cause he's up in heaven and some day, *(swishing her arms up into the air, making a whooshing noise)*, "I'll be up there too."

**SURELY THE EARTH CAN BE SAVED FOR KENDRA
AND ALL CHILDREN WHO KNOW THAT NO MATTER HOW SAD YOU ARE,
SOMEDAY*(swish arms up into the air, making a whooshing noise)*, WE'LL "BE UP THERE TOO."**

THESE DAYS I THINK OF A WOMAN I'LL CALL RACHEL, who was a young woman in her late 20's in my first church. She'd stop by to visit the office quite often because her three-year-old son loved to go for long walks and they lived about a mile from the church. Rachel was a loving mother, great fun in the College/Career Group, and a wonderful, creative addition to the Adult Education Committee.

More than anything, Rachel and her husband Rick wanted to have more children. They endured all the tests and procedures of IVF to find out why Rachel wasn't getting pregnant. And then

after several years of heartbreak, Rachel and Rick found out that their second child was on the way. Their feet hardly seemed to touch the ground they were so excited. They found out with the first ultrasound that they were going to have a girl. Rachel and Rick began to have hopes and dreams for this baby girl who was going to join their family. They told their son he was going to have a sister and they started getting her room ready.

But then in the fifth month of Rachel's pregnancy, complications started happening. Rachel went back to her doctor for more tests. The ultrasounds showed the problem. The baby's diaphragm, the muscle separating the heart and lungs from the rest of the internal organs, had not formed. With this muscular wall gone, the baby's internal organs had all moved up into the chest cavity and the lungs had not formed. Soon after receiving this report, they made the devastatingly painful choice of terminating the pregnancy, because their hoped for daughter would not be able to live outside the womb.

A week later I sat in Rachel's living room with her. One by one she carefully unwrapped the tissue paper treasures and handed me the little knitted cap they had put on her girl's head, and she handed me the knitted booties they'd put on their daughter's impossibly tiny feet. Then she handed me a picture the hospital had taken of their deceased daughter, whom they named Diana. Then she carefully rewrapped each item in the tissue paper and returned them to their special box, and told me what it was like for her and Rick to hold that little girl before they took her away.

In the mysterious ways of God, in that same week Rachel called the phone number on the book I lent her on miscarriage, to order a copy for herself. The phone was answered by the author of the book, Sherokee Ilse. The author was in the middle of writing a new book on pregnancies that end, or are ended because of genetic and physical reasons. She asked Rachel if she would like to help write the book along with other mothers and fathers who had lost their children during pregnancy and were adding their experiences to her book by sending quotes. Many of Rachel's comments are in the book, including this one: *"A lot of my confusion stemmed from the vast difference between what I was feeling and the message I was getting from everyone else. I felt very deeply about our loss but it seemed that most people said light things like, 'Oh well, try again.'...I still sometimes feel that I have to fight for the right to grieve for this baby...What has helped me the most has been writing down my feelings—not the medical facts, but my feelings—good and bad. I realize now that we did make a caring, loving decision for Diana."*

**SURELY THE EARTH CAN BE SAVED FOR RACHEL AND RICK
AND ALL PARENTS WHO'VE HAD TO SAY GOODBYE TOO SOON
TO A CHERISHED CHILD THEY LOVE.**

THESE DAYS I THINK OF DAVID who was a three-year-old member of the first church I served. David always came to church dressed for the occasion. There he'd be in his little three piece suit, his well shined black dress shoes, hair slicked down, comb marks still showing, and the biggest smile on his face.

Now, what you need to know is that First Presbyterian Church, Farmington Hills, MI had a ceramic tile floor in their big, high vaulted ceiling, entryway. And when you are a three-year-old, and have dressy church shoes, they make the best echoey tapping noise on ceramic tile floor! And if you dance on that floor the noise is amazing because it will make you so happy!

It got to the point that several of us tried to be there at the entryway when David arrived each week, because he would come dancing and clapping into church, laughing and giggling and tapping his feet. Thankfully he had the kind of amazing parents that know that sometimes a boy just needs to dance for joy!

My favorite memory of David is the Sunday he came in, did a few dance steps and announced to all of us gathered there :

“Here I am with my tapping shoes and my clapping hands ready to worship God!”

**SURELY THE EARTH CAN BE SAVED FOR DAVID
AND FOR ALL THOSE WHO ENTER THE LORD’S HOUSE WITH JOY,
AND SOMETIMES, EVEN A FEW DANCE MOVES.**

**THESE DAYS I THINK ABOUT
HOWARD,
OMAR,
KENDRA,
RACHEL & RICK--AND DIANA IN HEAVEN,
AND DAVID.**

**AND THESE DAYS I THINK OF ALICE WALKER who concludes her poem with these words:
“SURELY THE EARTH CAN BE SAVED
BY ALL THE PEOPLE WHO INSIST ON LOVE,
SURELY THE EARTH CAN BE SAVED FOR US.”**