

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**June 28, 2020, The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost/The 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time**

Psalm 13, Romans 6:12-23

**“THESE DAYS,” CHAPTER 11**

In the last 17 years I've preached ten chapters of what has become my life-long sermon series. Each time I've preached from this “These Days” series some of you have asked for the next chapter. I realized this week that it had been about a year a half since the last installment, so today's sermon is “These Days, Chapter 11.”

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 STEP AND A HALF**

a man in his late 60's who lived, and worked, and walked, in the two towns where I was a summer youth minister on the Oregon Coast 38 years ago. In those days the people of Pacific City and Cloverdale worked their dairy farms, were involved in the timber industry, and commercial fishing in the Pacific Ocean.

As far as I know, Step And A Half had always been a part of the community. Somewhere back in ancient history, with absolutely no political correctness, he had been named for the limp in his walk. I never knew Step And A Half by any other name than that, the townspeople called him that name to his face, and only the minister may have known his real name.

Step And A Half lived in a shack back in the hills of the Coast Range, his social security check came to the only bank in town, and people always complained that he would never spend any money on himself or his house. Although it was rumored that he had more than enough money in the bank to buy everything that everyone else thought he needed.

Step And A Half believed that he had been given a plan from God, and his purpose in life was to live up to that plan.

He had confided to the town's pastor that God had told him it was his mission to keep Oregon Coast Highway 101 litter-free from Pacific City, through Cloverdale, and out to Hebo and back, a round trip of nearly 17 miles.

And so, Step And A Half spent his days walking the sides of the highway picking up other people's litter.

Step And A Half was serving God in exactly the way he believed God wanted him to.

He was always dressed up for his work, wearing a wool suit coat and dress trousers. He'd take breaks sometimes to come eat at the free senior citizen's lunch the community provided once a week.

But then he'd be right back out on his 8-1/2 mile stretch of highway, keeping it clean for God.

Step And A Half was a quiet, humble man, faithfully serving God with his life.

**SURELY THE EARTH CAN BE SAVED FOR STEP AND A HALF,  
AND ALL THOSE WHO RECEIVE MESSAGES FROM GOD.**

**THESE DAYS I THINK OF A COLLEGE FRIEND I'LL CALLED MATTHEW.**

Matthew and I spent three years in the Religious Studies Department of the small Presbyterian College I attended in Spokane, Washington, back in the early 80's. Matthew was one of those people destined to be a full-time youth pastor. He loved sharing the good news of Jesus' love in creative ways with "his kids." He was also a scholar who studied hard, and was always prepared for the ways our professor pushed us in our small senior seminars.

But no matter what we were learning Matthew found ways to bring it back to his youth group. His life was shaped by helping the faith journeys of the high schoolers he served.

But he was a changed person the day in class he interrupted the professor at the beginning of the hour. With a shaking voice, and shaking hand, he put a xeroxed piece of paper onto the conference table.

There on that piece of paper was the grainy photograph of a member of the Ku Klux Klan at a local Klan rally, white-robed, burning torch in his hand, and the words on the page read:

"We are watching you. We know who you are, we know where you live, no one is going to stop us."

You could feel the fear rolling off of Matthew as he told us that he had found it in his campus mailbox that morning. With tears in his eyes Matthew said: "It was addressed to my mailbox number, but they wrote my dorm and dorm room number on the envelope too. The Klan knows where I live."

Matthew's fear filled up that small conference room. His fear became our fear. The rest of that year Matthew, and other African American students on campus, got hate mail from the KKK addressed to them by name. Every time it had the same words. "We are watching you."

Matthew decided to let them watch him graduate, join the staff of a big church, and continue telling "his kids" about Jesus' love for absolutely everyone.

**SURELY THE EARTH CAN BE SAVED FOR MATTHEW AND ALL THOSE WHO COURAGEOUSLY CHOOSE LOVE, IN THE FACE OF THE SINS OF HATRED AND RACISM.**

**THESE DAYS I THINK OF JALE HANSEN, MY HIGH SCHOOL FRENCH TEACHER.**

Mrs. Hansen stood 4'11" and she held a reign of academic terror over my High School Years. She was the most demanding teacher I ever had, even in grad school.

Jale was raised in Istanbul, Turkey. Her father was very wealthy, and active in Istanbul politics. He told his daughters they would be allowed to have an education as long as they never used it. When Jale started teaching, he disinherited her and sent her away with nothing.

She came to the United States and had to learn to dress herself, to brush her hair, to cook, all the things that servants had done for her all her life.

She was able to find work teaching immediately because she spoke eight languages fluently.

Within several years of arriving in the States she became a single parent and raised her two sons completely on her own.

Mrs. Hansen gave homework on the first day of school, and you had to turn in homework on the last day of school; she was that kind of teacher. In her classes you had to memorize 10 lines of French a week and recite them, write and read an essay every week, and of course do the nightly homework from the textbook.

We all towered over her, but she was truly the master of the classroom. By the time we graduated all of us had been reduced to tears at least once, because we weren't living up to her standards, and hadn't prepared well enough.

Mrs. Hansen expected us to do all that was assigned to us, to do it well, and to do it on time.

There were no excuses; there was only the pursuit of excellence.

When we weren't fearing Jale Hansen we were loving her. Her Christianity was a blatant part of her world; she loved all of us, her children, with the fiercest of loves. She, more than any other teacher, taught me discipline, study habits, and the love of learning.

I kept in touch with her, after graduation. We wrote back and forth for many years. One year I forgot her April birthday, and her letter to me the next Christmas included the cryptic message that “surely a girl of my abilities could be expected to remember her birthday.” She added that she was saddened and surprised by my inattention. She could get to me years after I’d left her classroom!

Jale Hansen lived her life with a no-nonsense approach to manners, duties, responsibilities and most importantly, the love of learning.

**SURELY THE EARTH CAN BE SAVED FOR JALE,  
AND ALL THOSE WHO GIVE THEIR HEARTS AND LIVES TO THEIR STUDENTS.**

**THESE DAYS I THINK OF THE REV. DR. DAVID IRWIN**, who, when I met him, was the pastor of Groomsport Presbyterian Church in Groomsport, Northern Ireland.

David was one of the most methodical, meticulous, careful pastors with whom I have ever been in ministry. He served God through a high level of organization, scholarship, and every minute detail being orchestrated in advance. In true British fashion there was the proper way to do things and the improper way, and David always chose the proper way. Always.

After receiving his Doctorate of Ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary he began welcoming American seminary students for a year of hands-on ministry learning, first in Groomsport, and later in Belfast. He carefully guided many years of young assistant pastors through all the areas of ministry. With a meticulously planned year he helped shape generations of pastors who were ready for just about any ministry situation when they returned to the United States.

David was a quiet man. He seemed almost stern when you first met him. But you would soon learn that he loved bad puns and jokes, and loved a good laugh. But not from the pulpit. Everywhere he went he collected sermon illustrations—no vacation was ever truly a vacation from ministry. David was always doing ministry. He was always learning.

Most of David’s ministry took place during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. It must be said that the Troubles cannot be defined as Catholics and Protestants fighting. The Troubles of Northern Ireland were a mix of issues including politics, economics, history, the land, paramilitary organizations, international terrorism, and yes, religion. There is no simple way to explain The Troubles. Sadly, many of the divisions of The Troubles fell along Catholic and Protestant divides.

In that mix of disrupted life, great violence and destruction, and years of entrenched hatred for the other side, David ministered to his church of 1300 members. He cared for people whose family members had been murdered by the IRA, he sat with Army and Police wives when their husbands were on dangerous missions, he sat with survivors of bombings, he pastored in times of great sorrow, and times of great division.

David would never tell you the stories of his ministry in the early years of the Troubles, but his church members made sure you knew who this quiet, organized man really was. When anti-Catholic protesters tried to block off the main street of the village so only Protestants could drive into the village, David stopped them. They say he went alone into the midst of the crowd, tore down the barricades and tossed them aside, and said theirs was a village open to everyone. The barricades stayed down.

The Groomsport Presbyterian Church was the first Presbyterian church in all of the North of Ireland to have a cross at the front of the Sanctuary. People left the church because they said it was too much like a Catholic Church to have a cross there. David said it was a sign of faith, and it was a sign of Jesus’ love; the cross remained.

In a time when many churches stayed separate from each other, David made sure Groomsport Presbyterian was part of the ecumenical movement with Catholics and Protestants. He and his student pastors would push through protesters to help lead worship with the Catholic and Church of England Christians of the community.

David Irwin shaped the lives of his family, the Groomsport Presbyterian Church, his village, the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, and the lives of many young American pastors.

**SURELY THE EARTH CAN BE SAVED FOR DAVID,  
AND FOR ALL THOSE WHO SHOW US THAT EVERYONE IS A CHILD OF GOD.**

**THESE DAYS I THINK ABOUT  
STEP AND A HALF,  
MATTHEW  
JALE HANSEN,  
AND DAVID IRWIN,**

**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.”***