

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

February 10, 2019, The 5th Sunday of Ordinary Time/Epiphany

Psalm 138, I Corinthians 15:1-11

THESE DAYS, CHAPTER TEN

In the last 16 years I've preached nine chapters of what is becoming 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 I haven't listened well because it has been five years since I last shared some these stories with you. So, today's sermon is "These Days, Chapter 10"

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 MR. FRED ROGERS. He was not the Fred Rogers of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood on PBS. He was my 5th Grade Sunday School Teacher.

If you were in American Sunday Schools in the late 60's and early 70's then you may have had a Mr. Rogers of your own. Well-pressed three piece suit every Sunday; in my memory it was always black. Flat-top haircut, a little longer than military length. Big broad shoulders hinting at a football when he was in High School. Glasses with black plastic frames.

In the fifth grade we learned about the Old Testament. Mr. Roger's loved the Old Testament. Mr. Rogers wanted his class to know all the details of the Old Testament. There were really hard tests. The most coveted prize was held in front of us, if we passed the test that came at the end of the year. It was a huge pencil, maybe even a foot and a half long, with a huge rubber eraser, a tassel tied to the top, and the books of the Old Testament circling the pencil. It was royal blue.

Mr. Rogers didn't care if you got the pencil, Mr. Rogers cared that you knew how important the Old Testament was. It held the stories of our faith, and every follower of Jesus should know the stories that Jesus knew when he was a child. He was fierce when it came to the Old Testament, which mostly scared us because we were too young to see his heart.

SURELY THE EARTH CAN BE SAVED FOR MR. ROGERS, AND FOR ALL THOSE WHO LOVE GOD AND LOVE CHILDREN AND WANT THEM TO KNOW AND LOVE THE STORIES OF FAITH FROM THE BIBLE.

THESE DAYS I THINK OF 10 YEAR OLD GEMMA whom I met one May when traveling in the Republic of Ireland 30 years ago. Gemma's family ran the Bed and Breakfast I stayed in south of Dublin.

Gemma looked like a postcard from Ireland, long red hair, blue eyes, lots of freckles. I arrived in the late afternoon and immediately Gemma was making plans for my visit. We would play Monopoly in the evening once it was dark out and she'd had her supper. We could play in the room I was staying in. She would probably win because she was very good at Monopoly, and did I know it was an American game?

But first we would go for a walk and she would show me her sheep. But even before that, because she had already decided I as quite her favorite guest, she would take me to the shop in the village pub for some salt and vinegar crisps, (potato chips). "Because you know they are quite lovely to eat when you walk in the fields."

Over the top of her head her smiling mum asked if this was ok and I said yes, I was traveling alone and it would be good to have some company.

Chips in hand Gemma and I went for a walk in her family's fields at the foot of the Wicklow Mountains. After chatting about school, her friends, life in the village, life on their farm, and the loft in the garage she and her brothers slept in when their house was filled with guests for the B & B, she pointed to a shed farther out in the fields.

"Do you see that shed?," she asked. "I put my coat in there when I'm playing in the field and I get too hot from running. It's where we hid the Dublin dentist who'd been kidnapped. It was such fun the (Gardia), the police were driving up and down the roads looking for him and I knew exactly where he was the whole time."

You see Gemma's family, and probably much of her small village, were part of the paramilitary Irish Republican Army, the IRA. Which I didn't know when I stopped to get a room for the night. The previous fall the IRA had kidnapped a Dentist from Dublin and held him for ransom from his family. They had proved they had him by sending two of his digits to the police. It had filled the Belfast papers as they searched for him. He had finally been returned to his family after 23 days. (Dr. John O'Grady)

SURELY THE EARTH CAN BE SAVED FOR GEMMA, AND FOR ALL THE CHILDREN WHO ARE RAISED IN WAR ZONES WHERE THE ABNORMAL IS A NORMAL PART OF LIFE.

THESE DAYS I THINK OF A MAN WHOSE NAME I NEVER KNEW, WHO LIVED IN THE ASSISTED LIVING BUILDING ACROSS FROM MY LAST CHURCH.

On sunny days he would come out the front door of the building, pushing his walker ahead of him. He would walk around the corner from the front door where he had signed out with one of the nurses. As soon as he was around the corner, and across the street from my office window, he would stop, fold up his walker, tuck it under his arm and stride purposefully down the street for his daily walk around the lake that was about 5 blocks up the street.

On the return trip he would stop before getting to the Assisted Living building, take his walker out from under his arm, unfold his walker, and pushing it ahead of him re-enter the building where much of his life was controlled by others.

We speculated that he not only assured the nurses, but his children, that "yes, he walked with his walker whenever he left the building."

SURELY THE EARTH CAN BE SAVED FOR THOSE WHO FIND THEIR OWN PATHS IN THE JOURNEY OF AGING.

THESE DAYS I THINK OF SUZANNE KAUPU WHO LIVED IN MY DORM MY FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE.

Suzanne was from Hawaii, the island of Oahu. She was half Polynesian, her father was a direct descendent of the Kamehameha Kings, and her mother was from North Dakota. They'd met in college where he played football.

Suzanne collected anything having to do with the Pink Panther, she danced traditional Hawaiian dances, at eighteen she'd already preached in her father's church, she loved to play rummy as much as I did, and our running score was in the tens of thousands by the end of freshman year.

Suzanne and I walked to church together on Sundays and talked about faith on the walks home.

At least once a week we'd jog the mile to the Baskin Robins Ice Cream and then walk back eating the rewards of our exercise. We laughed together, cried together, and sometimes even studied together.

Suzanne lasted one year on the mainland and then vowed she'd never leave Hawaii again. She didn't!

I lived with Suzanne's family in Hawaii for a month when I was twenty and she showed me the side of Hawaii most tourists never see.

She showed me the ravages of Christian missionaries,
and explained the ways her father combined his Christian belief with his island upbringing.

She shared the music, dance, and history that was basic to who she was. She took me to meet the elders who were a part of her world and whispered Hawaiian etiquette to me so I wouldn't seem rude.

She took me to her father's church where we sang hymns in English and Hawaiian, a phonetic language.

She and her sisters took me hiking barefoot on a sacred mountain, collecting ferns for traditional dances.

She took me to beaches tourists never go to and refused to take me to Waikiki, I had to go there on my own on the bus.

After college Suzanne was the Music Director of the large Congregational church in downtown Honolulu and she married the boyfriend we used to go snorkeling with on the weekends when I was there. We wrote back and forth occasionally as we both settled into life after college. When she was twenty-nine her husband Fred called up out of the blue to say that the cancer that had shown up when she was twenty was back, and Suzanne was near the end of her life and wanted me to know how proud she was of me now that I was a minister.

The inoperable cancer had shown up during her pregnancy with her second child, and the doctors had wanted to terminate the pregnancy. Suzanne refused. She lived and fought the cancer through the birth of her second son. She went home with him for two weeks and then checked herself back into the hospital to die.

Suzanne was a friend who taught me a lot about living and dying. I hope that her family still tells her sons stories of their mother who danced like the movements of the earth, who loved laughter, music, driving too fast, the Pink Panther, following God, and spending hours at the beach.

SURELY THE EARTH CAN BE SAVED FOR SUZANNE AND ALL THOSE BRAVE PEOPLE WHO LIVE WITH CANCER.

THESE DAYS I THINK ABOUT MR. FRED ROGERS, GEMMA, THE MAN WITH HIS WALKER, AND SUZANNE KAUPU.

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."***