November 10th , 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Ordinary Time

10:30 am

Holy Bartering

I. Even the Fathers of the Church...  
  
 This morning, following worship, we’ll be discussing a few matters and one of them will be my call to Springfield. As this season approaches, I like to take some time to reflect upon my call, recognize where I’ve been and where the Spirit has called us into our varied ministries. This particular year, I’ve reflected upon my propensity to negotiate with the Holy Spirit.

That is why we’ve read these two Scripture lessons this morning. There’s nothing more encouraging to me right now than seeing two of our Biblical stronghold fathers of faith in a ‘let’s make a deal’ mode with the Holy Spirit. It shows that even the people we can revere the most are human, and that’s encouraging as we try to live out this life of faith.

I love watching Abraham here, where he plays this bartering chip with God. What if 40 were faithful, what if 30 were faithful, what if 20 were faithful, what if even a few people were faithful in Sodom and Gommorah – would you save them? Could we make this work, could you not destroy them? Please? And God agreed-ish, but he couldn’t find any faithful, so ultimately Abraham’s bartering worked and didn’t to some extent.

And then you have Moses, beloved Moses, who works so triumphantly hard to get God to backpeddle on the anger towards the Israelites. The Israelites have gone so far afield that they cannot be saved at this point, they’ve just been so unfaithful and horrendous, and if anyone deserves punishment, we’re told, it’s these people. Yet Moses bargains, he pleads in fact – to let these people live. And God does, God lets these people live because of Moses’ pleas.

II. A life of bartering

As I look upon my own call, I recognize the bargainer in myself. I wonder – do you recognize the bargainer in yourself too? You see, whether I’m fifteen, thirty-three, or if I make it up to my 80s – I think I will always have a parental relationship with the Holy Spirit where I sometimes grumble, or say ‘fiiiiiine’, and offer a muddled and eventual, ‘Thank you, you were right, I like that you’re right, but sometimes it’s annoying. But thank you.’

There are many instances I could share with you across my life where this has been the usual plug-and-play relationship chat I have with God, but you’d be here for a few hours and you might reconsider that terms of call paperwork. Instead, I’ll share with you my first bargaining that I can remember and my latest.

II. The Pulpit

I was first called to ministry when I was thirteen years old. Thirteen tends to be a rough age for any kid, but for me in particular, I was anxious, painfully shy, and getting to school every day was a challenge. Social situations made me nervous, I was quiet, and generally scared of the world. I can’t really tell you why it was part of my development, but it was, and so it made this call to public ministry even more interesting.

Because, you see, though shy, I was a Girl Scout and I wanted to achieve this honor called a ‘Silver Award’ and part of that required me to go and shadow someone who I thought had an interesting career. For reasons that the Holy Spirit alone knows, I decided I wanted to follow my pastor on a Sunday. When I asked my parents and my pastor, I think both parties were surprised and perhaps both reluctantly and enthusiastically, I spent the Sunday with my pastor, Carl.

So, painfully shy, Carl asks me to read from the pulpit – and I can’t remember what part of the liturgy it was, nor is it really important in this context. When I stepped into that pulpit, for the first time, like a hug around my shoulders, looking out to people who loved and nurtured me, and a light that literally and figuratively shone on me – it was the first time in my teenage experience that I remember all of my anxiety going away. Completely. In that moment. It was so clear, so definitive, and I knew that the pulpit was home. I then announced after that Sunday to my parents and pastor that I would be wanting to go to seminary and then into parish ministry. Both parties again were...confused, perhaps, but encouraging.

Despite this life altering experience in the pulpit, you bet that the Holy Spirit and I had rounds and rounds of bargaining tries. A few for instances: when I about to finish college, the Holy Spirit and I had a chat and I felt the call but I didn’t necessarily want to go and I said, “Okay, listen, I’ll apply to one seminary. If I get in, I’ll go, but if not, I’m taking that as a sign that you want me to do something else.” And then I was accepted that one school. When I was about to finish seminary, I said, “Okay, listen, I’m not really interested in parish ministry right now, even though I know the whole pulpit and preaching thing is important, what if I do chaplaincy and we call it good?” And I did, and it lasted for six months and I realized I was miserable and not called to that good work.

The Holy Spirit and I will always do this dance, this one where I say, “But what if...” and the Holy Spirit comes back with a, “Okay, but just you wait and see now...” I think, I hope, the relationship is endearing. For all the times I’ve bargained, God has still chosen me, for all the times I’ve resisted, God has still led me right where I’m suppose to be, and despite not deserving grace at all, I’ve received it in abundance.

II. Mo-Ranch

Some of you know that I didn’t want to go on my last continuing education experience down in Mo-Ranch, a program called CREDO. In fact, I had been getting an invitation since I started at Springfield three years ago, and each time until November 2018, I said ‘No, put me on the waitlist.’ When my older colleagues would ask me why I wouldn’t go, I didn’t have a really great response, just an initial deep sense that it wasn’t the time when I was called to go and do this. For reasons known to the Holy Spirit, I finally said yes in November 2018, to attend in October 2019. What I didn’t know that the Holy Spirit did was that 2019 would hit like a storm – from scary diagnoses like ALS, the crash and divorce of a marriage, finding a new normal in some of the darkest days. The Holy Spirit knew I needed to go and be restored and find myself this October.

Yet, like the teenage relationship I have with the Holy Spirit, I still said, “You know, God, it’s kind of a busy time still for me, and I mean, I’ll go, but I don’t really want to.” And like a cranky kid, I almost missed my plane boarding, I got stuck next to Barry the mortician who wanted to share stories for 3 ½ hours, and by the time I actually made it to the Ranch, I was ticked off at God. In fact, I believe I even put on Facebook, “If this is hell, I’ve found it. It is so hot here.” I was stinky, I couldn’t find my room, I had a list of complaints a mile long and I was sure I was right – this was a terrible idea.

And then the program began, and then I started to make connections, and stories started to resonate with my own, and by the end of the week, I sat down with my small group, hand in hand, as we went around the circle and said a prayer aloud. I wish I was kidding, but my prayer went something like this, “Dear God, I’m really sorry I was cranky with you about this, I’m also a little grumpy that you’re alright right, but...I’m also really grateful too. Help me, God, to step into this world with a little more grace and a little more understanding. Amen.”

IV. Finding your story

This morning, I’ve shared with you parts of my story that you may have otherwise never known and I hope that it is an encouragement to you for you to share your stories vulnerably. I hope that you also have the opportunity to reflect upon your own life story thus far – where the Spirit has called, where the Spirit has not called, and where the Spirit is leading you right here, right now, today. I pray that you are inspired by the ancestors and generations of faithful people before us, that in their holy bargaining, God loved them and loves us too. May you be blessed as you continue your conversations with God, your moments of anger, your moments of doubt, and your moments of great awe at the God who leads and guides us in abundant love. Amen.