

Lamentations 3:22-33

Psalm 30

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Mark 5:21-43

Sermon for 6/27/2021

THE LOW BAR

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Just as we are, we come.

I was having a long leisurely conversation with someone over coffee last week, and one of the things we found ourselves talking about was the ways life is different when you're older than when you're a youngster. There are the obvious ways, obviously, like the physical problems that tend to accumulate as you age, loss of hearing, mobility and so on. And then there are the psychological differences that most older people appreciate and identify with to some degree, the regrets over lost possibilities and squandered opportunities, the rueful wish that you could relive some parts of your life and make different decisions, the general note of resignation rather than anticipation in one's attitude towards life, the sense of, *well, it is what it is*, rather than *here's what it might still be!* And then, of course, there's that bewildering phenomenon that every older person recognizes, but which is completely foreign to the young and of which they have absolutely no understanding, even when you talk to them about it. Most of you here know what I'm referring to: the sense of time speeding up. The days, weeks, months and even years just fly by. Our lives feel like trains that began by just barely chugging along, allowing all the time you could want to observe the landscape, but then start speeding up, going faster and faster, until the world around us seems to go by in a blur.

Those of you who don't yet know what I'm talking about, believe me, you will. I'm looking at you, Chey.

But the topic we ended up spending most of the time on was a little less mystical than that. What struck us both was how easy it was to make friends when you're young, compared to later in life. When you're a kid, every other kid in the neighborhood just naturally becomes your friend, right? Same thing in school,

almost everyone in your class, especially of the same sex, is your friend. Same thing in church. Maybe not your *best* friend, but still, somebody you can play with and do things with without feeling like you're being punished.

We talked about it and came up with various explanations, but the one we finally settled on was that, when you're a kid, you don't really have any requirements of other kids: you don't put up the barriers of requirements between yourself and anyone else. You don't require them to like certain movies that you like, or enjoy the same music you enjoy, or have the same background you have. You don't exclude them because of their politics or their looks or their annoying laugh. You basically take them as they are and get on with the special fun of doing things together. Am I right?

I think our gospel reading for this morning shows us how Christian love is like childhood friendship in this important way: it doesn't put up requirements.

Let's read it together.

Mark 5: 21-43

This is really a unique episode in the gospels in that it weaves together two separate events, and by recounting them together in this way, Mark clearly wants us to think about what they have in common.

Consider first the man named Jairus, whom Mark refers to as a ruler of the synagogue. That was actually a very important position in Jewish civic and religious life, sort of like being the mayor of a town and the chief trustee of the town's only church.

Imagine what it must have been like for such a man to come to Jesus for help. The opposition to Jesus was already spreading everywhere through the region on the part of the religious establishment. He was banned from preaching in the synagogue; he and his disciples seemed to ignore many of the strict requirements of scribal ritual and law; he was a known associate of sinners and the religiously unclean.

To come to Jesus for help would have cost Jairus his reputation, his social position, perhaps even the respect of his own family. What desperation over his daughter he must have felt to drive him to his knees before this rough, uncredentialed vagabond

preacher in front of his friends and townsfolk! He must truly have been at his wits' end, desperate to the point of near madness.

His faith in Jesus, we may say, was a sort of wild and hopeless grasping at straws, like a man tumbling over a cliff, who seems nothing but a single rose to grasp at the very edge, so that's what he reaches for.

And yet Jesus calmly comes to his assistance.

Or consider the woman with the issue of blood. Her medical condition would have made her ritually as well as physically unclean among the Jews, so as well as suffering the physical misery of her disease for twelve years, she would also have been shunned by her friends and even her own family. Her doctors had failed her, but she had heard about this strange young man from the boondocks who seemed to have magical power over disease. If she could just sneak through the crowd and touch a corner of his robe, maybe his magic would heal her. She doesn't know anything about his religious views or his preaching or his message of love or anything like that: her faith isn't in His divinity, it's in his magic. She's like the people who send money to the televangelist hawking magical prayer cloths; her faith is childish and superstitious.

And yet Jesus heals her, and even attributes the healing to that childish, superstitious faith.

And that's exactly the point, I think, or at least one of the reasons Mark includes the accounts of these two miracles in his Gospel. He wants to make it clear that it isn't the quality or purity or strength of your faith that Jesus sees: it's simply its existence. He sees the end from the beginning, and it's that beginning that matters. Your faith can be as madly desperate as that of Jairus or as crude and material as that of the poor sick woman, as long as it's directed towards Jesus, that's all that matters. He requires nothing more to do his work for you.

When I went to see a doctor recently about a pain in my knee, before I could see the doctor, I had to fill out a form that asked me about what my race and sexual orientation were, about whether there were any guns in my house, about whether I suffered physical abuse from anyone in my household, whether I ever worried about making car payments, whether I ever suffered from depression...and I'm thinking, I just want somebody to check my stupid knee!

It's interesting in this regard to reflect on the many occasions reported in the Gospel accounts where Jesus heals everyone who's brought to him. Great crowds of people seek him out, and he heals them all of their various infirmities. We're never told that he sits them down first and have them testify that they attend church regularly, or that they've been to confession recently, or whether they've ever beaten their wives, or even whether they believe in heaven or hell. We're just told that they came to him and he healed them, all of them, every one of them.

“If you have faith no bigger than a mustard seed,” Jesus once said, “you can move a mountain.” The mountain he was talking about wasn't Mount Everest or Mount Rushmore or even Mount Morris. He was talking about the mountain of your own life, and he was saying that He can accomplish the transformation of your own life, provided only you provide him with the seed of faith, no matter how small it is. He requires nothing more than that.

When Jesus fed the five thousand from a few little loaves and fish, he didn't tell his disciples to first check everyone's ID card, he simply fed them all. Why? Not because they were good or bad, weak or strong, male or female, Republicans or Democrats. Why did he feed them? Simply because they had come to see him. That was his only requirement.

The point is the same Jesus makes in many different ways and using many different images: He's not looking for the finished product; he's looking for the raw materials with which he can begin to accomplish his work in us. He's looking for seeds, not full-grown plants.

When I used to be on Facebook, I had a fair number of Facebook friends who were people I'd known as far back as grade school. There was one woman in particular who had been a really cute little girl I guess you could call my first crush. When we first friended each other after all those years, we exchanged a funny memory about how we were once seated by each other at the back of a classroom and carrying on so outrageously that the teacher, Mrs. Hendrickson, actually made me go sit by myself at a separate table for the rest of the hour, staring lonesomely out a window.

Anyhow, as time went on and I read my old girlfriend's posts about who she was going to vote for in the presidential election and why, I found myself thinking, Gosh, if I were to meet her now for the first time, we probably wouldn't have anything to do with each other, forget about puppy love. And I thought, what a shame, because she was still pretty darn cute.

Jesus once said that unless you become as a little child, you can never even see the kingdom of heaven. This is usually taken as referring to something like our own moral innocence, but I think he was saying something about the nature of his own love for us, which is the nature of God's love for us: it's a love without preconditions, without qualifications, without any requirement at all except, basically, that we live in the same neighborhood, which is the neighborhood of heaven.

And so our prayer for today, heavenly Father, is that we may not be discouraged in seeking your help and comfort by our own sense of inadequacy. We pray for your light in our darkness, for your help in our need, for the company of your Son in our loneliness, and we pray for these things in his name.