

Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
“Like A View Through Tinted Glass
Sunday, August 29, 2021

John 11:32-44

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus began to weep. So, the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’ But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.’ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’

All month long in our sermons, I've been telling you stories. Stories based on the fictional town of Perseverance, Missouri, that I like to go to when I tell a story. Perseverance is, in my mind's eye, located in northeastern Missouri just a stone's throw east of Kirksville and somewhere north and west of Hannibal. Perseverance Presbyterian Church is the oldest church in this town of 12,000 souls or so and is where I imagine myself as pastor. I went to visit Warren Anderson yesterday. He lives a few miles outside of town on a farm, which has been in his family since the 1870s, which in these parts is a long time. Now, Warren was never really a farmer. Oh, he dabbled that in a bit always having a big garden and a bunch of chickens and the like, maybe a half a dozen head of cattle or so each year. And there was a period of time where he'd have a few hogs one year and a few sheep the next just for a little spice and variety. But he's always rented most of his acreage to his neighbors, who grow corn and beans and occasionally sow some winter wheat.

Warren's passion in life has been and continues to be furniture. His store, which sits across the town square from church, has for years supplied the people of Perseverance with everything from couches and lamps to the finest tables and chairs to microwaves and even outdoor deck furniture. Over time, his store has become something of a destination for our entire region of the state as well as folks from Illinois and Iowa drawing folks to town who come looking for furniture options that they can find nowhere else. Warren retired from his formal work at the store a few years ago handing the reins over to his daughter, Bea, who, along with her son Harold, is keeping the Andersons tradition alive in town. I went to visit him because Warren had taken a nasty tumble a few weeks back and broke his left foot. He was sitting on a rocking chair on the side porch when I arrived. And while he greeted me warmly, it was easy to see that Warren was not happy, not happy to be confined to a rocking chair, not happy to be confined to that porch. Though his daughter Bea had had filled me in on all the details about how the injury occurred, I asked Warren what had happened. And as I ask him, I mentally prepared myself to sit a while because

Warren is known for telling good stories but really, really long stories.

The accident happened out in his workshop, which is in the barn behind the house. Warren needed a particular size bolt for the project he was working on, and he was pretty sure that there was one such bolt in the Old Hills Brothers Coffee can where he kept those had nuts and bolts and screws and washers and all the other leftover pieces of past projects. Warren came from a long line of folks who had survived immigration to this country and who had created a farm out of pretty raw, marginal land by using their resources wisely, by wasting nothing. Well, the only problem with Warren and this bolt was that he had uncharacteristically cleaned up his workbench a few weeks before. And he put that coffee can with all the extra stuff up on a high shelf over the bench. When he realized that the bolt he needed was probably in that coffee can, do you think Warren walked the 10 feet over to where a stepladder was propped against the wall? No, he didn't. He decided that the old wooden folding chair that he'd used to put the can up on the shelf in the first place, that that chair would do just fine. The only problem was that the chair had outlived its usefulness some 40 years before and was not a very safe thing to use for climbing. Now, but Warren is in great shape for being 83. He was simply too much for that old chair on that day. He got up on the chair. As he got up on it, it kind of swayed to one side. So Warren adjusted his weight and the chair responded accordingly, swaying back towards the center as he thought it would, as he needed it to. But then the chair just kept going, splintering like an exploding baseball bat, sending Warren sideways into a bookshelf-like wall of paint cans. Warren was lucky to have only hurt his foot.

When Warren finished recounting his harrowing adventure, I made the mistake of suggesting that a few new bolts from the hardware store, which after all, was one of his most favorite places in the whole world, that a few new bolts probably would have been cheaper and faster than a broken foot. Warren did not take kindly to my suggestion. It was like I had insulted his dog. And he proceeded to teach me a lesson about humility and about speaking less by telling another story, an even longer story about the frugality of his Danish grandfather, Albert. Albert was the first Anderson in the Warren's family line to be born in America, arriving not long after his parents had gotten off the boat at Ellis Island and taken a train to northeastern Missouri because they had cousins who lived in the Kirksville area.

Many years later, after the farm had descended from grandfather to son, it had become Albert's. Many years later, Warren talked about spending childhood summers on the farm with his grandparents, with Albert and grandmother Beatrice, both of whom he loved deeply. Besides running the farm, Albert also worked as a carpenter because farming never really paid all the bills, and money was always in short supply. Warren said that Albert was so tight with money that folks said he squeaked when he walked. Albert never wasted anything, which included bringing home leftover lumber and other architectural scraps from carpentry jobs.

One day Warren continued, his grandfather showed up with a small stained glass window from a little church he had been working on. It wasn't a fancy window. Wasn't a memorial window. It was just in the way of where the new classroom edition was to go. And the pastor, who didn't seem to care much for stained glass, told Albert just to throw it away. Well, throwing out a perfectly good window insulted Albert's frugality. So, he simply brought it home and stored it in the barn. The same barn where Warren had had his recent tumble. The window sat around for a few years until the south wall of the chicken coop had to be rebuilt one summer. Warren served as his grandfather's gopher on the coop project and remembered every detail like it was yesterday. He said the stained glass window got pulled out of the salvage pile and inserted into the new wall of the coop because his grandfather had been wanting to get more light in there so that it was easier to gather the eggs. Apparently, the window came to be deeply appreciated by Warren and the other grandchildren in the family who had always hated going into the gloomy, smelly chicken coop when Grandmother Beatrice sent them out to gather eggs for breakfast. Before the window went in, it was common to have a hand pecked by an unseen hen reaching into a murky nest for an egg. And it was common to step on an egg laid in the middle of the floor by an old hen that could not be easily seen. Apparently, the window also had the added benefit of calming the hens. Warren said they were so mesmerized by the patches of colored light shining upon

them and on the space around them that they no longer seemed to notice the nervous egg gathering grandchildren. They just stared at the window.

Besides wanting to teach me a lesson about humility, I think Warren told his stained glass story because of an ongoing project at church and some of the challenges this project is causing. Early this year, a late January blizzard made visible a long-deferred maintenance issue with one of the big stained glass windows in the west wall of the sanctuary. The blizzard began on Friday morning, piling up snow at a pretty good clip. And that night the snow-laden wind blew so hard that it caused a portion of the Jesus Blessing the Children window to bow inward by several inches. This particular window had been given as a memorial by the McCalister family in 1905 according to the dedication panel. Sally, who was only six, had quickly succumbed to whooping cough. And the heartbroken family in their grief, in wanting to do something tangible in their grief, commissioned a window, a stained glass window for the church, appropriately fittingly, Jesus blessing the children. I'm certain this window had received little maintenance attention since it was installed. The blizzard's gust caused the portion of the window containing the two or three children Jesus was blessing, to bow inward by several inches. Mercifully, this bow did not result in any broken glass. But some of the glass did separate from those little ledge strips that hold everything together, causing enough separation that when I finally managed to plow my way into the church on Saturday afternoon, I only noticed the damage to the window when I found a small accumulation of glass and snow on the carpet below the window. Oh, a couple of text messages quickly brought members of the Buildings and Grounds Committee from church to join me in the sanctuary, and together, we rigged up a tarp kind of thing to hopefully catch any additional pieces of glass that might separate from the leg binding, as well as to keep some of the cold and snow out of the sanctuary. Worship was a bit chillier the next morning, and the tarp certainly dampened the flow of natural light into the sanctuary. But the Lord was praised on the Sabbath despite it all.

On Sunday afternoon, after some online research, I placed an emergency call to a stained glass window company down in St. Louis. Who knew that stained glass companies had emergency contact numbers. The glass technician arrived on Monday, just afternoon. She did a little more stabilizing work on the window and said she would return later in the year when it was warmer to reinforce the entire window so that the damage panel could be taken out and taken to their shop for repair. Later in the year, it turned out to be just after the 4th of July, two glass technicians arrived with a truck full of engineered lumber and steel bars. And after much bracing, the bowed in panel was carefully removed and replaced by a plywood patch. The technician said it would be late fall before the repair was done and the window could be installed. And then they were gone.

I've been surprised at how difficult it has been for the congregation to focus on much of anything in worship during this time that the window has been out for repair. The plywood patch has proven to be more unsettling in our sanctuary. The light coming through the window now is certainly different. And this refractive change seems to have really thrown the members and friends of the congregation. I've been trying to pinpoint and name why this change in illumination is proving so unnerving. But every time descriptive words are beginning to form around an image in my mind, they just slip away into the light-altered air. The closest descriptive reasoning I've been able to grasp is a sentence from a book I read years ago in Olivia Hawker's novel, *One for the Black Bird, One for the Crow*. One of the characters, 16-year-old Clyde, is speaking of a girl from the neighboring farm that has confused and even disturbed him by the feelings and thoughts which arise in him when he is with her. Even when this young woman isn't around. Clyde describes her as undeniably and forcefully present, coloring his thoughts like a view through tinted glass. There seems to be something similar with this grand window in our sanctuary that colors and shapes the thoughts of the people who make up Perseverance Presbyterian and the damaged panel, the altered light, is interfering with our understanding of who God is and how the world works and individually and collectively how we fit into God's plan for creation. I'm hesitant to give such spiritual and even theological power to a lovely but unremarkable stained glass window. And yet the altering of the light which graces our sanctuary in all its many moods each Sunday and throughout the week, the altering of this light truly has us on edge and is impacting our understanding and our practicing of

discipleship.

More than the fact that the temporary patch just makes Jesus appear to be blessing an ugly piece of wood, looking like a carpenter who doesn't know what to do. More than that, this light-altering hole in the midst of our sacred space just seems to add to the mountain of unsettledness and uncertainty which is swirling in the air these days. Unsettledness and uncertainty, which most of us are already feeling some 18 or 19 months into this damn COVID pandemic. This disruption that is wearing us thin, it's like it's stealing our purpose, stealing our joy.

As I stood to go, I went to the rocking chair to shake Warren's hand, and he grabbed me with his bear-like grip and pulled me closer to him, and looking me straight in the eyes, he said, "Pastor, I think you need to call that stained glass company and tell them that we need our children back. We need them back sooner than late this fall, because with everything that's going on in the world, everything that's going on in our lives right now, we need their presence. We need their reassuring light to remind us that God is in charge and will take care of us. We need their reassuring light to keep us from pecking at each other."

As I drove back to town, I found myself thinking about the Apostle Paul's words at the end of his great love chapter in First Corinthians, "Now I see the world through a mirror dimly," says Paul, "but someday I will see face to face-- someday I will see God face to face." Maybe these stained glass children give us a glimpse of God that isn't dim or murky. A glimpse of God that calms our unsettledness, a glimpse of God that gives us hope.