

**Rev. Dr. bill Smutz**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
*“Returning from Anger”*  
**Sunday, August 8, 2021**

***Ezekiel 16:42-43, 59-61***

*So, I will satisfy my fury on you, and my jealousy shall turn away from you; I will be calm, and will be angry no longer. Because you have not remembered the days of your youth but have enraged me with all these things; therefore, I have returned your deeds upon your head, says the Lord GOD.*

*Have you not committed lewdness beyond all your abominations?*

*Yes, thus says the Lord GOD: I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath, breaking the covenant; yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant. Then you will remember your ways, and be ashamed when I take your sisters, both your elder and your younger, and give them to you as daughters, but not on account of my covenant with you.*

***Mark 11:15-19***

*Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, ‘Is it not written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations” ‘But you have made it a den of robbers.’ And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.*

From time to time, I like to offer the sermon as a story hoping that the telling of the story will strike a chord of meaning to those who listen to the story. And so, this month, I will be offering sermons in this story form. Normally, I've offered them kind of one at a time, widely spaced out. And so, this is something of an experiment. But I hope that you will enjoy it and find it more than enjoyable but find some meaning and purpose in these stories. On these storytelling occasions, I like to visit the fictional town of Perseverance, Missouri, which exists in my mind, just a stone's throw east of Kirksville and somewhere north and west of Hannibal. Perseverance Presbyterian Church is the oldest and largest church in this town of 12,000 souls or so, and it is where I imagine myself serving as the pastor.

When Dean pulled into the high school parking lot last Tuesday to drop Tommy off after his follow up appointment with Doc Houston, checking on the arm that had been broken when Tommy tried to jump the barbed wire fence on his dirt bike. If only that top strand of wire had just been a little bit lower or Tommy's back tire had been a bit higher. As Dean pulled in, he noticed Ray sitting in his pickup truck in the far corner of the lot, just staring off into

space. Now, since Dean had never seen Ray in the high school parking lot, probably because Ray's kids were through school 30 years before the new Consolidated High School was built a few miles outside of town-- well, Dean decided to see what was going on with his neighbor, Ray. He pulled up next to Ray's truck going in the opposite direction so that the driver's side doors were right next to each other. It was a warm day, so both their windows were down, and Dean looked into the window of the truck next to him and said, "What's up, Ray?" And it was like Ray was in some kind of fog. He was staring at the cornfield right in front of him, but his mind was a million miles away, like in California or Bora Bora or Timbuktu.

After a long pause, Ray slowly turned his head and said, "Oh, hi, Dean, what you're doing here?" "The better question," respond Dean, "Is what are you doing here?" Ray said, "Well, I was going home for lunch. I locked up the store right as the noon whistle sounded and got in my truck and drove out home. But when it came time to turn off the highway, I just kept going. And I guess I've been sitting here for a while." "I'd say it's been a while," said Dean. "It's nearly 1:30. Does Beulah know where you are?" Ray turned and stared absently at the corn again. "No." no, I don't reckon she does know. But I'm guessing that she really doesn't care either because we had a terrible fight this morning, and I said some horrible, horrible things. And I would suspect that if Beulah ever talked to me again, it would be too soon. Everybody in town knows that the fight had started last week while Ray and Beulah and the other members of the young couples' group who are all now in their 50s and 60s and even early 70s-- as the young couples group was busy getting Perseverance Presbyterian ready for the Fall Harvest Festival, which takes place on the first Saturday in August. Yes, the timing is odd, but most of the men in the group will be harvesting their own crops in September and October when a fall festival, a harvest festival is normally held. And the festival, it has to go on seeing that it is the sole means of support for the Sunday morning coffee fund which pays for the coffee and doughnuts that the church members enjoy before and after Sunday morning services.

Several years ago, Red Arneson suggested that the church stop spending money on such luxuries as coffee and doughnuts and give that money to foreign missions instead. Well, old Red's been over at the Assembly of God Church since about the time he offered that little sermon to Perseverance Presbyterian. Ray and Harry Blackman were in fellowship hall, setting up tables to hold the slices of pies that would be sold for 50 cents per slice. They were there setting up those tables when Beulah and Mae came banging down the stairs from the sanctuary with the old oak baptismal font. Harry and Ray ran over to help the ladies and rescue the font before it took one bang too many and something would break off of it as they were wrestling the font into place. And I do mean wrestling because this font is so big that I can completely submerge a baby in it if that were proper Presbyterian baptismal practice. As they were setting this massive thing safely down, Ray asked Beulah why they were dragging the font down the stairs. Did they have a plan for it? And when she told him that they were going to use it as the pond for the little duck fishing game at the Harvest Festival-- you know that game where children are given a fishing pole made out of a length of dowel rod with a piece of string tied to the end of the dowel and a little magnet tied on the end of the string as a lure, and the plastic ducks have another magnet glued to their back and a number written on their bottom side, and the kids fish a duck out of the pretend pond, and depending on the number on the bottom of the duck, they get some kind of little prize? You know that game. Well, when Ray heard about this intended use of the font, the font where Presbyterian babies have been baptized for some five generations in Perseverance, it was like something inside of him broke. And he said, "You can't do that. This is a sacred vessel used for holy purposes, not for carnival games. No. No, you can't do that. Well, if you don't know this about her, Beulah is one of those women who does not deviate from her chosen path once her mind is made up. She is also a strong believer in a

literal translation of Ephesians 5:21, where the apostle Paul says that wives should submit themselves to their husbands. And that is exactly what she does. Beulah submits all her ideas to Ray as soon as they pop into her mind and expects Ray to go along with them, no questions asked. Bueler said to Ray, "Don't be silly. Help me glue these magnets to the backs of the ducks." But Ray said, "No, I won't do it." Well, the next thing you know, Ray and Buelah are in a full-fledged shouting match right there in front of all the other members of the young couples' group who just stood there at a safe distance, silently staring at their feet, waiting until the fight was over so that they could get on their cell phones and tell the rest of the town what had just happened. Ray, who is known for being a pretty calm guy, just kept getting more and more worked up until finally, he was shouting at the top of his lungs that he wasn't going to be like any old money changers in the temple.

And as he turned to storm out of the room, he accidentally smacked his hip into that old baptismal font. The antique font rocked to one side and just seemed to hang there in the air for a long, long moment until it crashed on to the tile floor of fellowship hall with an awful thud. The others in the room lead out of gasp as a piece of ancient oak broke off the font and slid across the tile. Just as he stared at the scene of this disaster, Ray turned bright red and then pivoted and ran up the stairs and out of the building and got in his truck and drove away, leaving Beulah behind equally red and equally dumbfounded. Nobody could remember the last time they had seen Beulah speechless. Well, May took Beulah home. It was a very quiet ride, as you might imagine. And then nobody saw or heard from Ray and Beulah until he opened the store on Monday morning. She didn't bring her pies to the harvest festival the next day on Saturday, and there was no duck pond game. And they didn't show up for worship on Sunday either, though, the old thought was back in place, having been wrestled up the stairs to the sanctuary by several men at the end of the festival and turned, so that side with the broken piece did not show to the congregation.

When Beulah came in the door after May had dropped her off that Friday, Ray was standing in the kitchen. She just glared at him. And without a word, she walked past him into the front room, sat down and pulled out her knitting, and set to work, the needles clacking furiously. They didn't talk the rest of that day or the next day or the one after that or the one after that. As Ray was heading into town on Tuesday morning, Beulah turned off the radio in the middle of the farm market report, something that she just never did. And she looked Ray straight in the eyes and said, "You made a fool out of me." And it went from there. You know how those fights go when one person says something that stings the other. And so, in their pain, they say something equally as sharp back. And before you know it, two people who love each other and care for each other deeply, two people who have been married for over 40 years, two people who almost always see eye to eye, have forgotten who they are and have forgotten how to act properly and have forgotten how to extend grace.

When Ray finally left 10 minutes later, both he and Beulah had said some hard and painful things to each other, words you regret saying as soon as they come out of your mouth, words that cut deep, words that cause wounds that are slow to heal, words that leave you in a fog, which is where Ray still was when Dean found him in the high school parking lot staring into space all those hours later. Ray never did get back to the store that Tuesday afternoon. Instead, he drove to the church. Luckily, I was there working on the Sunday sermon and was able to help Ray carefully place the baptismal font in the back of his truck. When Ray got home, he backed the pickup into the pole barn that doubled as a garage and workshop. He had just maneuvered the font out of the truck using a couple of 2 by 10s as a ramp, no small feat with something as large as that font. And as Ray was looking at the font beginning to figure out how he might repair the damage caused when it hit the tile floor in fellowship hall because

he was trying to noodle this out, he heard a noise and he looked up and found Beulah standing at the door of the workshop. She looked at him and at the damaged font and then she looked back at the person to whom she'd been married for so long that she couldn't remember a time in her life without him.

And Beulah quietly said, "I'm guessing that Jesus helped pick up the tables when he was done knocking them over." And without saying a word, Ray scooted to his left a bit so that there would be room for her on the workbench right next to it.