

## **A Willing Spirit**

### **Psalm 51:1-12**

Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

# A Willing Spirit

Psalm 51:10-12

March 17, 2024

Rev. Michael Catanzaro

## I.

Today, we are going to take some huge, walking-on-the-moon kind of steps. First, though, a story.

Earlier this week Linda Potter, our church's esteemed and very dedicated book-picker for the annual All-Church Read, was walking back from the library, Post Office, Nature's Storehouse or wherever, and happened to spy two women, unknown to her, standing on the sidewalk in front of the new sign having what seemed to be a very earnest and animated conversation. Owing to the fact they kept pointing at the sign, it seems safe to assume the topic was the quote from Anais Nin which has been running all week: "We do not see things as they are, we see things as we are." Beneath this it simply read: "See you Sunday at 10 a.m. All are Welcome." When Linda arrived home and related this to me, I crowed, "Mission accomplished!"

## II.

This is exactly why the new sign outside our church is so important: it is engaging the community in ways which challenge the community to see our church *as we are*, not as they assume us to be. Meaning, "Yeah, it's *different* here, stop in and see for yourself."

Of course, there are any *number* of interpretations of this week's sign, which become increasingly more interesting the more you consider the words and ponder the possible conversation these two women *might* have been having. What a delightfully paradoxical and illuminating moment: making the jump to seeing the world and, especially, our church as *they* are, even as they realize that in so doing they are actually seeing more of *themselves* owing to the fact that we see *them* as a result of how we see *ourselves* through our belief that each of us has been created as a unique and magnificent child of God (Got all that?!?)

### III.

I mean, the whole purpose of a church putting a message like that on its front lawn is to invite people to stop, think, and, hopefully, have a conversation. Then there is the kicker at the bottom, inviting others to come and be seen by us; to be noticed, to be acknowledged and to be valued.

The idea of noticing others, valuing them for all they might be, and understanding honest and earnest conversation as the tool we have and must hone to discover not only the value in others but, in so doing, discover our own value as well is *exactly* what this year's All-Church Read(s) is/are all about. I will tell you, in the 21 years our church has been undertaking the endeavor, this year has been, for me, by far the most delightful, insightful and hope-filled. Which is *exactly* what this salty, old pastor and person needed; and, I'm guessing, is something all of you could use a bit of as well.

### IV.

Given that this is an atypical year for our All-Church Read in having selected not one, but *three* different books, "How To Know A Person" by David Brooks, "Stargirl" by Jerry Spinelli, and "Noticing" by Kobi Yamada which, together, span a wide age range while, at the same time, share the same basic themes, I thought it would be fitting to have an atypical sermon (or sermons) to go along with them. While in years past I would have offered a rather detailed plot summary of the book and invite you down into its details, this year I'd like to move the other way, beckoning you skyward to glimpse a view from 10,000 feet so as to better understand the process rather than just the parts.

### V.

Linda and I have always appreciated and enjoyed David Brooks owing to watching him for many years on PBS News Hour's Friday segment when his cohort, Mark Shields, was alive. So, when his latest book came out, "How To Know A Person," Linda immediately devoured it. So impressed was she by the book it created an inspirational theme in her which is currently flowing through her work as a retreat coach and with Hospice, has been utilized in our church's Women's Circle and, most germanely, was the impetus for this year's All-Church Read. The quote from Anais Nin currently running on our sign is actually from the Brooks book, where it appears in the chapter entitled "What

Is A Person?” Which, in and of itself, is a very good question, in general; even more so when it is a *church* asking the question.

I will focus, specifically, on the Brooks book next week, during the Palm Sunday sermon. As part of this, we will have a list of questions included as a bulletin insert which we are going to invite you to use during the pot-luck brunch after worship as a way to put some of Brooks’ ideas into practice with the goal of allowing and encouraging us, as a congregation, to get to know others and allow others to get to know us.

## **VI.**

Intrigued by the ideas presented by Brooks, Linda then set out to find a book with a similar theme for the many Tweeners, Teens and young adults in our congregation; in particular, the abundance of girls and young women with whom our church is currently blessed. This led her to selecting “Stargirl” as the second of this year’s All-Church Reads.

A coming of age novel published in 2000, the book recounts a shy eleventh-grader, Leo, who falls in love with Stargirl, a free-spirited newcomer at Mica High. When his fellow students turn against Stargirl (and Leo as well) he pressures her to become ordinary like everyone else. Over the course of the novel, Leo learns the importance of staying true to yourself. Through this story Spinelli explores themes of individuality, kindness, and the painful consequences of nonconformity.

## **VII.**

For me, the book is nothing but a joy; insightful, amusing, warm-hearted and a real encouragement for people across the developmental spectrum. While clearly demonstrating the challenge and angst of being a teenager, in any age, the author does not wallow in it. Instead, we are presented with the very wonderful title character, Stargirl; a curious cross between Pippi Longstocking and Mother Teresa; a bit far-fetched so as to border on science fiction, but with a relenting sense of falling well within the bounds of human possibility and potential. No small feat.

## VIII.

Rather than recount the story and spoil the experience, I would prefer to encourage you to have such an experience for yourself by sharing a few of my favorite quotes from the book:

*Don't you get it? She's the world's greatest nonconformist.  
She doesn't care what people think about her.*

*We did not know what to make of her. In our minds we tried to pin her to a cork board like a butterfly, but the pin merely went through and away she flew.*

*On the contrary, she is one of us. Most decidedly.*

*She is us more than we are us. She is, I think, who we really are. Or were....  
If anyone is acting, it is us. She's real.*

*It was a rebellion she led, a rebellion for rather than against. For ourselves.*

*Bad things did not stick to her.*

*Correction: her bad things did not stick to her.*

*Our bad things stuck to her very much.*

*All her feelings, all of her attentions flowed outward. She had no ego.*

*She was elusive. She was today. She was tomorrow.*

*She was bendable light: she shone around every corner of my day.*

*She taught me to revel. She taught me to wonder. She taught me to laugh."*

## IX.

Though a very hard act to follow, Linda proceeded to sweep the series by selecting "Noticing" by Kobi Yamada for all the younger kids in our congregation. I will admit to you that all week I was really looking forward to reading the book this morning as part of the children's sermon. I really miss that particular privilege of being a parent, reading to kids. You can literally witness worlds unfold through their eyes when you do so.

As a church, our role is to help our kids open up within themselves an inner world of faith; one important way we do so is by talking about Jesus. That said, if we want kids to have a real and meaningful understanding of Jesus so as to foster and form an authentic faith for *themselves*, we, as a congregation, have two very important decisions to make. First, are we going to just *talk* about Jesus (which is relatively easy) or are we going to talk to kids about what Jesus is all *about* (which is a much greater challenge)?

## **X.**

This week I got a text from Rev. James Galasinski, my colleague and increasingly good friend over at the Unitarian-Universalist Church. He asked if we might get together next week to have a conversation about Youth Group. Seems their numbers over there have dwindled to three or four kids, and he was exploring the possibility of doing some combined activities together with kids from both of our churches. I admit I was a bit surprised by the request, on a number of levels; but not unpleasantly so. Frankly, this was the first time in *years* someone other than I had suggested any form of ecumenical or interfaith effort. That, to me, is a tremendous development and movement in the right direction.

However, as is always the case, the tricky part for *us* would be how to do so in such a way that is scripturally based and theologically sound? *That* would be the challenge. Fortunately (mystically) with all of this coming in the midst of our All-Church Read, we can play this out in real-time, and within the context of our own church by returning to the book, "Noticing."

## **XI.**

*When we look at others, we may see*

*their faces and their clothes, but we are only  
seeing a tiny piece of who they really are.*

*We often don't notice the important things, like their capacity for love,  
what they hope for, what they dream of, or who they can become.*

*We often miss the most beautiful parts of them.*

*The miraculous is everywhere and in everything. Waiting for us to notice it.  
Waiting for us to appreciate it. Waiting for us to love it.*

Without question, we can well imagine this being read to kids at the UU church. The difference, though, between it being read there across the street, and reading it here on the Park is *enormous*: with this difference being the rationale *for* reading it and the context *in which* it is being read. While teaching kids to find, or "notice," the beauty in everyone is a positive idea upon which all would agree, our understanding of scripture and our theological interpretation of it tells us that seeing the beauty in others is *only* possible because we have come to believe that God, our Creator, *first* sees such beauty in us; and, moreover, that such beauty is really the light of Christ that God has offered *to* us arising from God's love *for* us.

## **XII.**

Noticing Christ in others, then, is the rationale for our church reading books such as “Noticing,” “Stargirl” and, “How To Know A Person.” In the beginning of this latter book, Brooks relates stories about the importance of honoring people by the attention we give. One of these stories is about “Jimmy,” a pastor:

*When Jimmy greets a person, he is also trying  
to live up to one of the great callings of his faith:  
He is trying to see that person the way Jesus would see that person.  
He is trying to see them with Jesus’ eyes;  
eyes that lavish love on the meek and the lowly,  
the marginalized and those in pain, and on every living person.  
When Jimmy sees a person, he comes in with the belief that this person  
is so important that Jesus was willing to die for their sake.  
As a result, Jimmy is going to greet people with respect and reverence. (Pg. 31)*

While Brooks doesn’t go quite so far as to say truly knowing a person requires a belief in God, he comes about a half a step close to that in predicating the *entire* book on the belief in the concept of a soul which creates in us a posture of respect and reverence, an awareness of the infinite dignity of each person we meet as a precondition for seeing people well.

## **XIII.**

Now, all of that *sounds* good, but what each of us here already knows is that is *exceedingly* difficult, if not outright impossible, to see the soul in others without first seeing the God who put it there. This, to me, is an example of talking about Jesus by talking about what Jesus is all about. Which, of course, leads us right back to talking about Jesus; except now we have a fuller understanding of *how* and *why* we are talking about Jesus in the first place. Moreover, this leads to a fuller understanding of the importance of *where* we do the talking, which is the second of the decisions we must make as a congregation: what is the place and space from which we will be talking to our kids about anything and everything, including Jesus?

## **XIV.**

Harkening back to the text from Rev. Galasinski, one thing I plan on discussing with him is that while the *role* of a church remains steadfast, the *nature* of what it means to be a church has changed, and *is* changing;

radically so. While we all might pine for the days 50 years ago with 30 or 40 kids in a High School youth group or, even, 10 to 15 kids 20 years ago, those days are *gone*; particularly in communities and churches of our size. Kids and their parents just have too much they are being asked to do these days; and, frankly, while it is exhausting to them it is hard to find a way clear. Though there is no reason not to dream, we should not judge ourselves by the past; either as parents or a church.

Instead, we need to figure out new ways of talking to our children; not only about Jesus, but also about spiritual formation, ethical conduct, self-discovery, and, in particular, the importance of service to others out of a sense of gratitude rather than the onus of duty. In this regard, Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan was spot on: the medium *is* the message. We can talk about Jesus, and what Jesus was about all we want, but whatever message our kids will hear is solely a function of how well our church embodies the love of Christ in our life together.

## **XV.**

Which, in large part, is why we began holding the All-Church Read in the first place. Yes, as a denomination that espouses the importance of having a learned and reasoned faith, we need to cultivate and stress the importance of reading in everyone, but especially in our kids. And, yes, we understand that talking about what Jesus is about is one of the best ways for us to actually talk about Jesus. However, the *real* reason for the All-Church Read is that it helps our kids learn the powerful lesson that we are paying attention to *them*, and that they are part of this church family; those who can make it to church on a Sunday, and those who may not.

This year, in a very Stargirl-like act of kindness, we distributed 18 copies of “Noticing” and 20 copies of “Stargirl” to over 50 church kids. In such a simple and straightforward act, we demonstrate an awareness and respect for where these kids, and their families, are at in *their* lives, letting them know they are valued, seen, and listened to; all in an effort to cast a loving attention on them. This is what David Brooks calls, “Illuminating,” and is the very first step in getting to know a person.



## **XVI.**

One of the important themes running throughout each of this year's All-Church Read selections is the subjectivity of how we choose to see the world *and* how we choose to see ourselves. Said in a slightly different way, if we want to change the world we need to first change how we see ourselves; hence the quote from Anais Nin, "We do not see things as they are, we see things as we are."

However, another truth which needs to be held in tension with this is found in something Leo says in "Stargirl": "I had never realized how much I needed the attention of others to confirm my own presence." That, right there, is the challenge our kids face *each* and *every* day. Now, kids being kids, they are going to seek out and find that attention *somewhere* and from *someone*. As a church, then, our job is to make sure we give kids get the kind of attention they need so as to confirm their presence in ways which are healthy, nurturing and loving.

## **XVII.**

It isn't just kids who need this confirmation, though, is it? The entire world is waiting to be loved. We *all* need to be confirmed in our lives, and this is what the faith journey is all about, and why we walk it with one another. This is why it is so important that we get to know each other and, in so doing, come to know our God. Doing so creates in us a pure heart and a right spirit, even when we feel far from each other and from God, even when we feel devoid of spirit. In such moments, God works through those around us to confirm the joy to be found in the salvation Christ provides, so that we receive the gift of a willing spirit. That is, a listening spirit, a seeing spirit, a knowing spirit, a valuing spirit that has the power to sustain us in every stage of our journey through this life as we work our way home to God.

## **XVIII.**

All the while, we become the prism which bends the light of Christ so as to allow it to shine around to every corner of the world. In so doing, we will teach our kids, each other, and the world, to revel, to wonder, and to laugh. Mission accomplished. Amen.