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Preached at KVCC
October 8, 2017
Meditation: Yes, and then Yes Again

This is not a simple parable to unpack. The context is that Jesus was criticizing the temple leadership and how he felt they were treating the people of God. They got the message, and they didn't like it, but as they were terrified of the crowds of people he was attracting, there wasn't a lot they could do about in the moment.

Another way of looking at it is to ask, who owns the land that this church is sitting on, or where your home is located, or for that matter, who owns the all the land in the Adirondacks? Who owns all the land in this country. The mountains, forests, plains, deserts, lakes, streams, and shorelines – the whole bit.

The reality is this land was around before humans showed up and it will be here long after we are gone. Our relationship to this land is of a moment; our ownership is an artifice that we have created. Jesus would say, this land is God's, and God doesn't like the way we are treating it, nor how we treat other people, in particular those without power.

Further, he is pointing out that when people are treated badly, at some point they will lash out, they will stop respecting the people in power, and turn to violence. He's not condoning the violence, but pointing out we will reap what we sow. How we treat others matters. If we treat others unfairly, with disrespect, don't pay them a living wage, and keep hoarding the bounty for ourselves, then we should be prepared for violence. And at some point, that violence will be way more than you or anyone can handle; and it will destroy those you love the most.

Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, the stone you have rejected, my people, the meek, those you have treated badly, is my cornerstone. If you continue treating my people badly, these fruits of the land will be taken away from you and given to them.

Right now, we have eight people, two connected to this community and church, seeking to take on our Congressional representative. This reflects a frustration no less than the election of our president reflected a frustration. That frustration is bubbling forth in a variety of ways and unless we start treating people fairly, kindly, and with a spirit of generosity life in the United States could get far worse before it gets better.

As we know, the priests in the temple decided that the best way to deal with this rabble rouser Jesus was to have him killed which they eventually did; but destroying the messenger by no means stopped his message.

The question here being asked of us is what path do we wish to follow? God's desire is that we work for the better good of all. That's not an easy request, but I have been pleased to learn from Betsy Thomas Train and Jane Haugh that over 40 people have signed up to be pen pals of inmates living in solitary.

When they made the case to us some months ago as part of a mission moment, a few of you heard their request, and two weeks ago shared excerpts from letters that have been exchanged with inmates living in solitary confinement. We also heard how brutal it is on the family on those incarcerated. Carol Harriott of Brooklyn, a woman whose son is in solitary at Dannamora, shared how she has been disrespected by corrections officers, how her son has been confined to solitary for demanding that he and others be treated with respect, and how emotionally hard it is having her son in prison.

Betsy, Jane, and Martha Swan also brought the play Mariposa and the Saint to Keene Arts and other venues in the region, a play co-written by a woman currently serving time's ordeal in solitary. The outcome is Betsy and Jane have gone from having four people signing up to be pen pals to over 40. They, with your help, are making a difference. If they had a 1,000 people signed up, every inmate living in solitary in the North Country would be getting a letter, and our elected representatives would be getting over 1,000 letters to end this cruel practice.

Up on Beede Lane the Habitat House is progressing. Jim Marlatt and his team of volunteers are making progress but winter is coming. When I was growing up we had a couple snow falls by now. They are racing against nature's clock and they need every bit of volunteer help they can get. This unseasonably warm weather will not last. If you don't know how to pound nails, there are lots of other tasks. All they need is for us to say yes. The neat aspect about it is you'll be hanging out with people you know, and people you wish you had met sooner. The people who volunteer are can do people.

Dan Plumley is looking for a few good people to help him modify our land use codes in Keene so as to reduce our fractured landscapes to one that provide spaces for people to build their homes and businesses; but in a manner that reduces barriers to brook trout in the streams, the barriers we create that blocks

toads, turtles and salamanders in our forests from migrating to and from vernal pools to the highlands, and the mowing of thousands of roadside field of milkweed that blocks Monarch butterflies from having a place to lay their eggs and begin a new cycle of life.

The challenge and opportunity for achieving these and other worthy goals that can lead to a more humane society is connecting with people outside our comfort zone. The Pharisees couldn't do it. They had isolated themselves from the very people they were charged to serve. They lived in a gated community of their own making, and cared more for their own well-being and authority than for the well-being of others. They were out of touch, no less than we are when we create barriers to separate us from people whom we perceive as different, as a threat, as being uncouth or uneducated, and not worthy of our time.

One of the things I have learned in the over ten years as a columnist for the Lake Placid News is that people in this region are all very interesting, everyone has a story to tell that's worthy of a listen. One of the people who opened my eyes when young was my grandmother Climena, the founder of the Mirror Lake Inn. Her father made his living as a guide and caretaker. She came from extremely modest means and through hard work and a focus on excellence created a hotel that to this day remains as the best hotel in Lake Placid.

She never forgot her roots. The cooks, the maintenance staff, the wait staff, those who cleaned the rooms were nearly all from the lower side of town; some had mental and emotional health issues; some were alcoholics; and some were getting on in years. She gave them opportunities, paid well, and never asked anyone to do anything she wasn't willing to do herself. What I learned, is that they were all very interesting and would stand by her in good times and bad times.

A disconnect between the landlord and his tenant farmers is that he didn't seem them as people; he saw them as replaceable, as subhuman if you will. The shooter in Vegas spent hours a day, day after day, intensely playing poker with a machine. He was living a disconnected life and killed in a disconnected way from far above shooting bullets into a crowd some distance away. One of the aspects of having an inmate as a pen pal expressed by those who read in church is how normal the letters are; they discovered that they have many shared interests and concerns. They learn that inmates are people too.

We all tend to hang out with people we are comfortable hanging out with and doing so we miss the opportunity to learn how rich our community truly is and how much we have in common. Further, we fail to create bridges to understanding and cooperation, and that has led to a polarized congress and the kind of leadership we have in DC. So, what I'd like everybody in church to do right now is to make a date to have a cup of coffee or tea with someone near you you've never broken bread with before. Great locations are Cedar Run, the Noonmark Dinner, at the Sub Alpine, or at one or the other's home if you wish. You can work out the details after the service. For the moment, I invite you to turn to someone near you and make the commitment.

My greater desire, is that you will make the same gesture to someone outside this church. Think of the staff at the Valley Gro, or at Noonmark, or a resident of the Neighborhood House, or the guys at the transfer station, the people who work at the hardware, or who sell goods the Mountaineer, or teach at the school, or who work at the town hall, or for the highway department. I wouldn't start the conversations with questions about sex, money, or politics, entertaining though that may be, but maybe what do they love about this community, and what one thing could help make it better. And then, thank them. And next Sunday, tell me what you learned.