

Taking Jesus Seriously and Ourselves Less Seriously

February 26, 2017

Matthew 5:38-48

One day, years ago, the phone rang, and the caller said, “Mrs. Froese?”, when I answered. Now, whenever I hear someone call me Mrs. Froese, or in some way mispronounce or stumble over my name, I assume that this is a marketing call, I don’t know them, more importantly, they don’t know me, and I can be short with them, ie. Rude. So, I can’t remember if I replied that Mrs. Froese didn’t live there, which I sometimes did, or if I said, “Actually, my last name is Rudy-Froese”, but not in the tone of voice that exuded patience, tolerance or love. I was about to hang up when she apologized for not getting my name correct, and then said, “This is Mrs. Schumacher, Ben’s junior kindergarten teacher.” Yep, it was a humbling moment.

I remember wondering why it was that because I didn’t know someone, I thought it was OK to be rude. I have thought about this phone call at various times and in various ways. I can’t say I’ve successfully lived up to that realization, but it was an important one.



I have a friend who shared with me that she didn’t want to put up one of these signs because she actually doesn’t like her neighbours. Her neighbours weren’t undocumented immigrants, or Muslims or African Americans. This was not a comment about race or not wanting certain people to be welcomed into her neighbourhood. No this was about her actual, real life white neighbours whom she didn’t like, people who

were hard to live beside, and she couldn’t, in good faith, put a sign in her front lawn that said, “No matter where you are from, we’re glad you’re our neighbour”, because she wasn’t happy to have the neighbours she did!

Is this sign just for people who look different than us, who come from another part of the world, worship a different God than us, or is it a welcome for everyone? If we put the sign in our yard, does it hold us accountable for how well we love our neighbours and our enemies?

Does it apply to our neighbour who always waits to start up their lawn mower or leaf blower until we are nicely settled in our back yard, in hammock or lounge chair, or sitting down to a quiet dinner with friends? Or who waits for you to come out so they can lean over the fence and chat with you about anything and everything when you only have an hour to tackle the weeds in your garden?

What about the neighbour who always comes over to borrow something and then never gets around to returning it, and you have to go over and get it when you need it? Or the neighbour who lives upstairs who always seems to be moving big pieces of furniture morning until night?

Or what about our Confederate flag waving neighbour?

Does this sign apply to those neighbours? In these situations, do you really want an “I’m glad you’re our neighbour sign” in your front yard!? How much do we actually love the neighbours we have, rather than the ones we picture when we think of “No matter where you are from, we’re glad you’re our neighbour”?

And let’s not even begin to talk about our family members and friends who disagree with us politically and theologically! That would just open up a whole other can of worms and we don’t want to go there!

This morning we want to take a playful look at the side of ourselves we would do anything to keep others from seeing. This side that we keep hidden is our shadow side; it’s the things about ourselves we don’t want anyone to see; we for sure don’t want our boss to see it, or our close friends; we probably don’t even want to admit to ourselves that it exists. We certainly don’t want God to see this side of us. And yet it exists in all of us; in fact, others see that side of us, whether we like it or not, and no matter how hard we try to keep it hidden. You can be assured that those who live most closely with us have met this hidden side of us!

When our shadow is never acknowledged, or let out, it finds ways to make itself known, and often those ways are unhealthy, sometimes even destructive. At the very least, these hidden parts of us keep us from living fully as the people God made us to be, and the people God calls us to be.

Just look at the state the country is in now. You can believe the world has met the shadow side of the US, but as long as it continues to see itself as the faultless hero, the savior of the world, it will continue to be the bully on the world playground.

I think we have also seen the shadow side of Mennonite denominational life in the last couple years as well. We see ourselves as people of peace and justice, firmly rooted in being Jesus followers, the Bible as our book for life and living. But as long as we don't acknowledge the places in our life together where we fall short of what we profess; if we don't see the places where our words and actions do not profess peace and life, we will continue to be intolerant of those who think differently than we do.

In looking at our shadow, shame is prominent. It's what keeps us from even acknowledging our brokenness, because we are so ashamed of those places. So I invite us to laugh a little at ourselves this morning, at our earnestness, at our deep desire to follow Jesus. Laughter can be healing, if we let it, but not if it is the laughter of derision, or laughter that is intended to make fun of, or humiliate or shame. Healing laughter is laughter of self-awareness; it is the ability to look compassionately at our brokenness, and say, "O, you are trying so hard. Just let go a little. Lighten up a bit. Don't take yourself so seriously."



And so this morning, I'd like to introduce you to Marilyn "Ram 'em" Rudy-Froese. She doesn't get out much, but on Friday, Feb. 10, she made her debut appearance at Bethany Christian Schools, riding with the pastors' donkey ball team. Ram 'em is not allowed out much, because Marilyn likes to be in control, on top of things, and always seen to be competent, efficient, and put together. Marilyn

likes to think she can do it all. But the reality is, there are times when that strategy is like falling on your.....head.



What Marilyn discovered, when she let Ram 'em out to play, was that there is something freeing about giving up control, about embracing her incompetence, her inefficiency that sometimes doesn't see other people. It is sometimes really freeing to not be put together. And when she gave up some of that control, she also had more courage to grab the ball, to shoot it aimlessly at the basket, and be OK with not succeeding. Marilyn would never grab the ball, because she would be too afraid of not making a successful basket, or falling on her....head. Actually, Marilyn's fear of not being good enough to play means she never plays basketball because "she can't". But Ram 'em embraced of her ridiculousness, and in doing so, was freed from the need to impress and succeed, even as she was quite aware that falling on your head hurts, but it just meant you had to hold on tighter!

Marilyn and Ram 'em had an interesting time negotiating who would be preaching this morning. Ram 'em seemed to be up quite a bit this week at night, needing to work on this sermon. But in the clear light of day, Marilyn was able to bring back some sense of order and control to the sermon! Yesterday morning, Ram 'em almost had Marilyn convinced she could stand up here and preach this morning without a script, but fortunately, Marilyn won out!

In baptism, we use the imagery of being washed clean. I myself have preached about this beautiful image of dying to the old self, and rising to the new. It's powerful to think about the transformation of that moment, and being given new life, new hope, a new beginning. And this is true and powerful and real. **And**, most of us who have lived the baptized life, know that that moment of baptism is likely the cleanest we'll ever be!

(although, if you look closely at the pond where Berkey does its baptisms, you'll see the scum and goose poop, so maybe we do get that it isn't all about being clean!) For the Christian life is about joining Jesus where Jesus goes, and that's to the tax collectors, the sinners, the prostitutes, those who hang out in the seedier parts of



town. Joining Jesus is about placing ourselves in the messiness of human life; going to the places where Jesus went, which is to suffering and confused people. And, if we're honest, we can't go just to those places of other people's messes; we have to also get in touch with our own mess; with the chaos and muddle of our own selves. Rowan Williams says that "a baptized Christian ought to be somebody who is not afraid of looking with honesty at that chaos inside, as well as being where humanity is at risk, outside....it is being with Jesus 'in the depths' of human need, including our own, and also the depths of God's love." (*Being Christian*, p. 5) He says further that as baptized Christians, we claim a level of solidarity with others; "to be Christian is to be affected—you might say contaminated—by the mess of humanity....you don't go down into the waters of the Jordan without stirring up a great deal of mud!" (p. 6)

Picture this: Beaming with love, a beautiful, serene bride in a stunning white dress gracefully makes her way down the aisle.



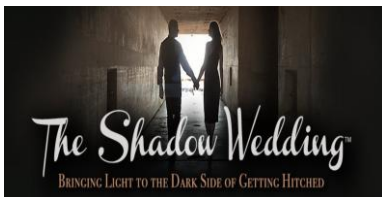
A handsome, confident groom stands smiling from the altar, gazing purposefully at his bride as he watches her approach.

Faces of family and friends shine in ear-to-ear smiles, some eyes fill with tears. Vows are spoken, rings are exchanged, and a kiss is met with happy applause. The setting is pristine, with gorgeous flowers, fantastic food,

great music, and well-satisfied guests. The whole event goes off without a hitch.

(www.shadowwedding.com)

But those of us who have been married, or are married, know that this isn't the whole of marriage. As a companion to this glossy wedding, picture the shadow wedding, "bringing light to the dark side of getting hitched", a ritual for those who



want to name and acknowledge the things they know about themselves that will make them hard to live with. This is a ritual that happens before the wedding, preferably in the dark, with trusted friends and witnesses. Openly acknowledging their own faults, the couple makes their vows to each other: I promise to support you and love you at all times, until we go

visit your parents, and all they want to do is talk to me about their political views, and then I'm going to disappear into a corner and read my book, ignoring everyone and everything around me, including you. Then the other partner says: I

promise to love you, to support you in everything you want to do, to be willing to compromise, negotiate and always find the solution that is best for each situation, unless you don't agree with me, then I'm going to sulk, pout, give you the silent treatment, all the while saying, "No, it's OK. I'm fine with this. It really doesn't matter to me." And maybe our trusted friends and witnesses cheer or boo us, depending on how well they think we will live into this vow.

Because, let's face it, after the beautiful flowers, the gorgeous dress, the stunning tuxedo and the smiling and tear-filled faces, marriage never looks so glamorous or glorious again. Sure there are wonderful moments of intimacy and love, but the realities of living so closely with another person bring out the best...and the worst in us. It is helpful to name that and put it on the table, so it doesn't take us by surprise.

I've thought a lot over the years about how easy it is to love the stranger far away, but how much more difficult it is to love the neighbour, or brother or sister, near at hand, under the same roof as us, in the same pew, in the same community, in the same conference, in the same denomination. Love of enemy, love of neighbour is so much easier to live out when our enemy is on the other side of the world, and our neighbour lives across the state line, or is an undocumented immigrant, or a refugee fleeing untold horrors in their country. Sometimes, it's easier to love our neighbour whom we perceive as quite different from us; the difference makes them easier to love, because we don't expect them to agree with us, or think like we do. It's those who profess to be part of the same church as us, or part of our family, whom we assume think just like us, but don't, that we have a harder time loving.

But our world, our world leaders, would have us believe that those who are different from us, who don't look like us, are the ones we are to fear; to exclude; the ones we need to be protected from. The culture around us would say that difference is dangerous, those who are different from us are our enemies, and therefore, people we should hate.

Circumstances in the last year in this country, and particularly in the last month, have heightened my awareness of this love of neighbour/love of enemy. I've had many conversations with some of you here at Berkey, and others outside the congregation about what it means to love now, in this time and this place. Does

love of neighbour apply to our friends and family who voted differently than us? Does it apply to those who are spouting hatred and prejudice? To the president of this country?

What does it really mean to love our neighbours? What did Jesus mean when he said, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you? Was he serious? Did he actually mean this is how we are to live? Did he actually think we could do it, or that we would want to do it?

Lord, have mercy! Because this, THIS, is not what we signed up for when we entered those sparkling baptismal waters and said we would follow Jesus!

This is the last Sunday before Lent begins. Part of the task of Lent is to bring all of who we are to the journey with Jesus and lay it at the foot of the cross. Part of laying who we are at the foot of the cross is acknowledging that we love our neighbours and our enemies imperfectly, or maybe not at all. Part of laying who we are at the foot of the cross is acknowledging that we have a hard time even wanting to love our enemies; even desiring to pray for those who hate us, or hate our neighbours.

Perhaps as we go into this season of Lent, all we can do is pray for the desire to want to pray for our enemies; to want to pray for the president; to want to acknowledge that if God loves everyone, then God must surely love our enemy who believes differently, or our enemy who offends us with their vile and hateful speech.

The theme for Lent this year is Restore us, O God. And we desperately need God's restoration. In order to open ourselves fully to being restored, we have to acknowledge the areas within us in need of restoration.

My spiritual director taught me a prayer that I have found to be helpful when I don't know how to pray, or am struggling with lots of conflicting prayers within me. The words are simple: I am here. This is a prayer that you can pray as a breath prayer; it is a prayer that begins right where we are, in all our falterings, failings and shadows—I am here; it is a prayer asking for God's comfort and presence, asking for God to see us—I am here; it can be a confession of our inability to love our enemies—I am here; it can be our prayer of thanksgiving and gratitude for all

the goodness in our lives—I am here. The most important part of the prayer is to say it; to acknowledge that we are here, and to know that that is enough.

It is a prayer that can be as simple as these 3 words. It is also a body prayer, and I invite us into this prayer to close. We will pray it with gestures a number of times. Use this time to offer to God the prayers of your heart—your confessions, your desires, your hopes, your dreams, your gratitude.

God, we are here and you are here. We are grateful. It is enough. Amen.