

HIGHER GROUND



Scripture:

Jeremiah 1:4-10

⁴Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, ⁵“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

⁶Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” ⁷But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. ⁸Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.”

⁹Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Luke 4: 16-30

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” ²⁴And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



TATE DONOVAN

I heard this story recently told by the well know actor Tate Donovan. He was out on the town one evening about to meet up with some friends. He encountered a young couple also having a nice night out. They were all decked out; the guy was wearing a

very nice suit and tie and his girlfriend was wearing a beautiful dress; she even had a corsage. It appeared to him that this was going to be a special night for the young couple. The couple spotted Tate Donovan. The young man pointed to the camera he was carrying and asked the actor, “Picture?”

Well the actor has had this experience happen to him many times and has understandably grown a bit tired of interacting this way with the general public. But he figured, they are young and this was apparently a big night for them so he obliged.

He went and stood next to the young woman, and anxiously waited for the young man to take the picture. The young man hesitated a bit, so the actor put his arm around the young woman and struck a friendly pose with her. He looked at the young man and said, "Okay, we are ready, you can take the picture."

The young man timidly took the picture. Tate Donovan said something appropriate to the couple and they looked at one another puzzled. The young man then asked the actor, "Can you take a picture of the two of us?" The young man pointed to himself and his girlfriend.

It was at that moment that Tate Donovan realized that the young couple didn't have a clue who he was. They didn't know that he was a famous actor. All they wanted was for him, Tate Donovan, to take a picture of the two of them, on their special night. They didn't want a picture of them with this stranger, this kind of weird older guy.

Tate Donovan thought so highly of himself that, of course, when they asked "Picture?" he thought they wanted him in it. Tate Donovan thought of himself as living on higher ground.

JESUS IS BACK HOME

Interestingly enough, that is where we catch up with Jesus this week in Luke. Jesus has been teaching and healing people throughout the region of Galilee, performing miracles, teaching, preaching and healing people of their illnesses. He has become the most well-known Galilean in decades. He has large crowds of people following him around. But now he is back in his home town of Nazareth, in his home temple. His friends and local town's people are so excited to hear and see him. This is their home grown boy. Heck, this is Joseph the carpenter's son.

I can imagine the locals saying, "You know Joseph worked on my house; he built and installed my front door. Jesus used to work with his dad you know; I think Jesus was there helping when Joseph installed that door at our place. I am pretty sure he was there."

As Jesus starts his message in his home town temple, the people are right there with him, listening to his every word, nodding in agreement as he speaks, marveling at his wisdom. This is our home grown boy.

But then he sits down with them and speaks more, and their agreement turns to outrage. You see Jesus had the audacity to say that God would include all people in his kingdom. In our reading from Luke, Jesus cites two instances when God chose foreigners over the faithful Jews. Jesus is pointing out to his home town crowd that not just the Jews, but the gentiles, the unclean, even the dreaded Romans would be included in God's kingdom.

For the Jews of Nazareth you couldn't say anything worse. These were struggling people; Nazareth was a small little back water town. The only thing the people of Nazareth had going for them was their Jewish heritage. They may have been poor monetarily, but they were rich in spirit and were God's chosen people. They saw themselves as being better than the non-Jews, because they were specifically chosen by God.

For their favored son, Jesus, to come home and tell them that they were not any more important to God than those awful gentiles, those dirty Samaritans, those power hungry Romans, was the absolute worst thing that you could say about them. They were angry beyond belief. They knew they were entitled people, and they believed that they were the only people God had chosen; no one else was worthy of God's kingdom. They believed that they were on higher ground than everyone else. They were so angry at Jesus they wanted to push him off a cliff; they wanted to kill their home grown boy for speaking what God asked him to say.

JEREMIAH

In our reading from Jeremiah this morning we are reminded that God sometimes will call the most unlikely people, the most unexpected, perhaps even someone who, in our minds, seems unqualified to speak the truth to us. In Jeremiah he picks a boy, a young man really, to go and speak God's words, God's truth to the people. Jeremiah is young with little or no formal education, with no standing in the community, with no credentials in the eyes of the people he was speaking to. But that is who God sent, not who they expected. And if Jeremiah was to come today, I don't think we would expect it either; he just doesn't fit the model of spokesperson for God.

THE GRAN FONDO BICYCLE RIDE

For a number of years I have ridden my bike in the Gran Fondo bicycle ride that happens here in Sonoma County in late September or early October. It is a wonderful ride; I ride it with seventy-five-hundred of my best friends. For those who ride in the Fondo there is a choice of three rides. They all start and finish at Finley Park in west Santa Rosa. The short ride, the piccolo, is about thirty-seven miles. The middle ride, the medio is about sixty-seven miles. The Gran Fondo is over one-hundred miles. I have never been brave enough to do the Gran Fondo; the medio is enough of a challenge for me.

The first few years I did the ride in about the same length of time, in just under six hours. So on the third year I made a goal for myself to do the ride in five and a half hours or less. I was determined to take at least thirty minutes off of my previous times. I trained especially hard that year and it was a perfect day for riding, so as I started the ride that year I was confident that I would achieve my goal. I had the perfect strategy and I was going to stick to it.

At the first rest stop outside of Occidental, I was right on track. At the rest stop after the big hill climb after Coleman Valley Road, I was doing even better than I had hoped for. So as I got into west Santa Rosa, I knew I was not only going to achieve my goal but I was going to shatter it.

SHATTER MY GOAL

And somehow, to my surprise, many people knew I was shattering it as well. For within a few seconds after I made the final turn into Finley Park, spectators lining the finish line broke out in loud applause and were offering encouragement and cheering me on. Or at least I thought so.

I thought to myself, why wouldn't they be there to applaud my accomplishment? I had shattered my previous best time, and I was sure they somehow knew that.

But oddly enough the cheering did not stop when I crossed the finish line. People didn't swarm over to congratulate me; in fact the cheering seemed to get louder after I finished. It was only after I got off my bike and turned around that I realized what all the cheering and applause was really about. There, less than two-hundred yards behind me, was the actor Patrick Dempsey.

PATRICK DEMPSEY

I had no idea at the time who Patrick Dempsey was, but I quickly was told that he was a television

star, a very well-known and accomplished actor. He was good looking, younger than me, and the spectators, especially the women, thought he was the greatest. They were very impressed with his accomplishment. But I thought to myself, I finished before he did, in spite of the fact that I am older than he is. But make no mistake about it, the applause was all for him.

I had given it my all, trained hard, didn't walk or even stop at all up the steep climb on Coleman Valley Road like so many others had. I had planned out how I could achieve something great and did it, and no one else even noticed. I was disappointed and even a bit angry. But, I was quickly reminded that good looks, youth and star power, none of which I possess, goes a long way. And even though I had done really well, a lot of other people a lot older than me had finished way before I had.

Listening to all that applause, I was thinking way too highly of myself. I had placed myself on higher ground. I thought I was more important and entitled than Patrick Dempsey or any of the other riders who finished behind me.

HIGHER GROUND IS SHAKY GROUND

But when I put myself on that higher ground, what I was really doing was putting myself on shaky ground. It is only when we can show gratitude and give thanks for all that we have and put God first in our lives that we can be on truly solid ground.

Putting themselves on higher ground than other people got the Jews in Nazareth in trouble, just as it got the actor, Tate Donovan, who was asked to take the picture, in trouble, and it got me in trouble. Putting ourselves on higher ground can bring about disappointment, but even worse it can bring about anger. When we allow ourselves to get angry about something that we think we are entitled to, that only we have a right to, or we hear something spoken that we find uncomfortable to hear, we can so often find ourselves reacting in a negative way. When we get angry we are less grateful. When we get angry, our family doesn't want to be around us, co-workers keep their distance, and fellow church members avoid us.

Trying to separate ourselves from the rest of God's people can really cause us to lose sight of God and what is important in life. Higher ground is shaky ground.

POTATO CHIPS

I read a study recently that was done at Stanford University. Oddly enough the study was about potato chips, of all things. The study found, not surprisingly, that the potato chip manufacturers offer several different brands of potato chips to attract different demographic markets. They hope to attract the more affluent buyers by appealing to their attitude of superiority, by their desire to be on higher ground. The study found the aspiring affluent want to be noticed, especially by the less affluent.

When the less expensive chips were advertised, they used words like fresh, light, basic and extra on their packaging, pedestrian, simple words, nothing fancy, nothing exotic. The more expensive chips mentioned why they are so much better and they used words like: natural, savory, culinary, and gourmet to describe them and they touted their chips were hand raked. (I don't know what that means, but it sounds expensive.) But even more importantly, they listed what they are not: not fried, not greasy, no MSG; no artificial colors or chemicals are added. By listing what is not included, it adds to their superiority. Yet the finished potato chips are nearly identical in their actual ingredients. The manufacturer takes advantage of the human desire to feel superior over other people, and they do it because it helps them to sell their more expensive products.

So as a result of their understanding of human behavior we pay more for the same thing because we want to be on higher ground; we want to be better than everyone else.

So not only does our idea of entitlement lead us to be angrier, and less grateful, it also costs us more money.

PRIDE

Henry Ward Beecher said, "Pride slays thanksgiving, but a humble mind is the soil out of which thanks naturally grows. A proud man (or woman) is seldom a grateful man (or woman), for he never thinks he gets as much as he deserves."

In our reading from Luke, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

I don't know about you but I so often realize that I have been held captive, that I am blind, and I am anything but free, and I long to hear the good news.

We live in a society that encourages living in excess; more is always better is the motto. We often view someone who is angry as someone who is a strong leader, and we view being grateful and humility as being signs of weakness.

Jesus came so that we might be set free from the desperate situation society often places us in. Jesus came so that we will no longer be blinded by the values of our society and our world. Jesus came so that we will no longer be held captive by wanting to be on higher ground than others. Jesus came so that we will no longer feel obligated to live the life that is so often offered in this world.

No, Jesus came to show us an alternative way to live with one another, a way that will truly lead to happier, more fulfilling, more meaningful, more rewarding lives. He brings good news.

So the question we have to ask ourselves is this: are we ready to follow Jesus' lead, or are we more comfortable following the lead of the world in which we live?

The choice is ours: higher ground or solid ground?
Amen

(The words of the last verse of the last hymn were: I'm gonna sing so God can use me anywhere, Lord, anytime! I'm gonna sing so God can use me anywhere, Lord, anytime!)

Benediction: Leave this place singing, and as you leave this safe haven and go out into the world, remember to search for God in all that you do. Follow the lead that Jesus blazed for us. Seek out the solid ground in all that you do.

And go, knowing that Christ, the all-time master builder, is with you now and forever. Amen



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