

I must say I wasn't really anticipating there being a Hairy the Spider sermon 2.0, at least not so quickly after the first one and yet here we are, because, well, I have an update. We had Confirmation last Sunday, and because of daylight savings we had to shift classes from outside to inside because it was too dark. So we gathered in the lobby with the glass doors and the columbarium doors open, which made for quite the wind tunnel effect during class, but that's besides the point.

Before class had started both Abby and Carl had brought up my apparent spider issues that had come to light during last week's sermon, and I owned that yes, they were mildly ridiculous, but it is what it is. So, we're near the end of class and out of nowhere, Carl asks me, "Pastor Tina, are you really that scared of spiders?" And I said that generally no, I don't do super well with them depending on their fuzzy levels. And Carl, God bless him, says very calmly, "So that one by your foot...what about that one?" For a very hot second, I thought he was messing with me, a little bit of a practical joke on the pastor before the end of class, until I looked down by my feet and there was Hairy...a bigger, badder version of Hairy.

I, in no way, think this was the same spider, but the likelihood that they were from the same family? That I would bet some money on. So, there he is, just chilling on the floor of the lobby, dangerously close to my

feet. And I know, I said last week that I could have smushed him easily, but again, here we were, and my gut instinct was to step back and away from Hairy and look at Carl and say, can you deal with him? Are you game for smushing said spider? And then, quietly, but very confidently, Abby kind of halted the whole conversation in its shoe smushing tracks. You see, here was the kicker about class...we had spent the whole evening talking about the 10 Commandments, and so Abby asked the logical question in light of what we had just spent two hours talking about and the reality of Hairy the Spider reemerging into my life. "Pastor Tina, didn't we just say we aren't supposed to kill things?" And there it was...the moment when somehow the rubber meets the road of scripture and spiders. So, we did the only thing we could in light of that question. We left Hairy alone. He wandered his little heart out in the lobby and eventually by the time I was done putting things away for the night, he was gone and I can only hope that that meant he had taken advantage of the wide open doors and made his way back outside.

Now, there could be a lot of points to this story, some as simple as, spiders are not that scary and let them live their little, hairy lives in peace. Others though could be that we all are capable of learning our lessons and changing our hearts even when it comes to something as small as spider smushing, or taking it a little bit further, that salvation has a way of finding

all of us, all of creation, even Hairy the Spider, but sometimes that salvation comes not only from the hands of Christ, but from the hands of each other.

Today's gospel is the final, *final* thing that Jesus tells the disciples before they shift their focus to celebrating Passover together and heading to the upper room and we all know how the story goes from there. So Jesus has kind of laid several things out for them, they need to keep awake and keep focused because they don't know when he's going to come back, in the meantime, they need to take the things, the gifts, the talents, the tasks that he has handed over to them and not hoard them or ignore them, they need to grow and develop them for the sake of the kingdom Jesus came to bring. And now, Jesus kind of lays out to them how they do that, what their ultimate focus is meant to be, and the answer is really fairly simple. Their focus is meant to be on others...all others.

There's a ton going on in this story that Jesus weaves for the disciples, a story that kind of sounds like a parable, but also just kind of sounds like a play by play for what's going to happen after the keep awake days are over and Jesus returns. One of the biggest things to notice, right off the bat, is that Jesus says that the Son of Man will gather all the nations before him. Now, this doesn't seem like that big of a deal, and yet...it is. Because the word used here for nations, is the word that also is generally used for

Gentiles, for others, for people of all nations. Jesus is telling the disciples that when he returns he won't just be gathering just all believers before him or just gathering those that are in the in crowd before him or just gathering the people of Israel before him. Jesus will be gathering literally everyone. No caveats, no exceptions, all of humanity, all of creation will be gathered before the throne of Christ. This is *huge*. It's huge because it blows wide open our idea of who Jesus came for and will return for. There's no corner of creation that will be left ignored by Christ when he comes in his glory. Everyone. Everyone will be there. Full stop.

And I know, our brains turn a little bit and want to be like, well sure, he'll gather everyone, but *you just know* that there's going to be some kind of test and that test is going to have to be about *belief*. Sure, Jesus will have everyone in front of him, but if they don't believe in Jesus then that's kind of gotta be the end of that, doesn't it? That's what we want the caveat to be, because we know that's a test we can handle. If the baseline requirement is belief, then amen, come Lord Jesus, because we believe, and we know all the people who *don't* believe and so Jesus will just take care of them, and life and salvation will play out the way *we* think it should.

However...that's not the system that Jesus then goes on to describe when it comes to distinguishing between sheep and goats. The benchmark

of judgment? It has nothing to do with our belief. It has everything to do with how we treat one another. Actually, I guess I shouldn't say it has nothing to do with belief. It has everything to do with who we believe we see Jesus in, who we believe is part of Jesus' family. That's the benchmark and that is a much harder test to have placed in front of us.

Jesus lays it out quite simply...those who feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, who welcome the stranger, who clothe the naked, who care for the sick, who visit the imprisoned, those are the sheep. Notice Jesus doesn't say anything about belief, it's not even that they did it *because* they knew they were doing it for members of Jesus' family. They did it because that's who they are called to be, because it was the right thing to do, that is what designates the sheep. The people who simply care and care for the world around them, without preconceived notions or judgments or caveats. It's the people who look into the eyes of their neighbor, all of their neighbors, and see them as people worthy of care, protection, and basic levels of decency. The goats are those that that fail to make that leap. Who see those who are struggling and their brains churn with all the reasons why they shouldn't help, why those people aren't deserving of help, why they should be able to deal on their own, why they might not be members of Jesus' family. It's a harsh reality to take in, because we know which group we tend to fall into.

The goats are those that fail to see God in their neighbor, that find a million different reasons for why they shouldn't care for them, rather than finding the one simple reason why they should: God loves them. We all know how our minds work with so much of this...there must be people God doesn't love, or at least deeply disapproves of, some people who are hungry have put themselves in that position and need to fix it, some people who are sick, well there are options for health care as long as you can afford it, some people are simply deserving of where they find themselves.

We don't want to admit that this is how our brains work, but we all know we've had those thoughts, and Jesus knew the disciples had those thoughts. There were plenty of sick people that they tried to turn away from Jesus because the crowds were too big, they tried to send the 5,000 home to feed themselves rather than have Jesus feed them. This is why now, at the very end of things, Jesus wants to orient their brains. Their most basic call is to care. Their most basic ministry is to look into the eyes of every person they see, regardless of belief, regardless of anything, and see Jesus looking back at them. It seems so simple and yet we all know that that call can be one of the hardest things we strive to do.

We so desperately want to the gatekeepers to salvation, to be able to define who is in and who is out, because then it can be on our terms, and our

terms are always going to be ones that we can meet. Far too often, we don't want to hear about Jesus' terms because Jesus' terms call us out, call us out for what we have failed to do and call us out into the world to serve and live and love all the while setting aside our prejudices and our judgments so that our neighbors can know that they are loved. That's the kind of world that Jesus wants to come back to and reign over, one in which all of God's children, which means everyone, knows that they are cared for, cherished, appreciated, and loved. Jesus wants to return to a world of sheep, those who at a baseline level recognize the deep and precious humanity of their fellow children of God.

And we're not always going to get it right. We're going to have our goat moments, they're unavoidable, but our hope, our goal is that we have more sheep moments than goats. We hope that our hearts can be moved, be shifted, to see the world with a bit more grace, with a bit more love, not because we are striving for salvation, but simply because it's who we were created to be. Our fellow sheep need us, and we need them. Honestly, I need Hairy, to take care of other bugs and critters that exist in the world, and he needs me to not smush him. Our hearts can change. Our goat tendencies can be transformed, sometimes in small, don't kill the spider ways, and sometimes in major, I will dare to see Jesus in my neighbor ways. **AMEN!!**