

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL

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“Sticky Issues: How Low Can You Go?”

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Welcome to our final edition of Sticky Issues in the Summer. Again this is not about how humid it has been or not. This sermon time has been giving us a chance to look at the parts of our lives where we get stuck. This week we look at paradoxical spiritual truths that appear not to make sense on the surface, but do make sense once we give God a chance to explain them to us.

In the twelve step groups, there is a phrase that often is talked about, that I am still thinking about, and wondering about what it means for each one of us. It is the phrase, “You have to hit bottom before you will truly decide to seek the help you need.” I believe it has something to do with knowing how needy you are. This is something I mention quite frequently here because it is the foundation for everything else that comes with the Christian faith.

If you don't know your need of God, if you don't come to church or to a spiritual group knowing that you have a great deal more to learn, then why are you coming? It is the very first step in the 12 step programs and it is the very first step in Christianity: our lives have become so unmanageable that we must seek God and the community to help us change, because we have failed to change ourselves and no self help program can ever change you the way you need to be changed.

But if you don't know your need, and can't name the areas of your life that need work, then how will you know if you are growing or not, maturing or not, facing what God wants you to face. So take a moment and consider what you think your greatest need is, or list a few.

Some of us have become irritable and unreasonable without knowing it. Others know it. Some of us have sustained significant losses, but do not know how to navigate the grief we are experiencing. Some of us have serious conflict at home, at work, or in some other area of our lives. Some of us don't know how to give comfort to others, particularly if they have health issues or other issues.

Some of us wonder how low we can go and still hold it all together. But at the bottom (and all the way along the path there) is a helping hand, and a

voice of hope. God's voice often comes through human beings, but it also can sound loud and clear on its own, and of course, through Scripture.

It may be hard to know our need, when things are going well. When we have our health, our friends, our job, our family, our close relationships, our home, our financial health, our mental health, our possessions, our routine, all seems to go okay. But when one or more of these leaves us, then we enter that zone, where we can try to fight the loss, or try to learn from what is being lost.

Jeremiah was particularly hard on the people of Israel before the deportation. All was well financially, culturally. The kingdom had escaped what had happened to the northern kingdom, the sacking of Samaria and the deportation of its people. But although things appeared to be going well, spiritually things were not going well. The people had forsaken the Lord and had tried to replace his living water with their own mucky, broken, cistern or water system.

I don't know if you've ever lived with a compromised and/or questionable water system in your home. You're not sure if you can drink it. You're not sure if you want to wash your dishes in it. If it is discoloration, or a funny smell, or an insect infestation of the well, you don't usually want to bathe in it. We take our clean water for granted, except maybe when a vehicle or two plows into the pond that supplies the city water, and spills diesel in it.

We take our spiritual lives for granted as well. And sometimes we simply think that our church, and our faith can somehow operate on auto-pilot. But Jeremiah warns us that if we do not take care of our water system, and know for sure that we are trusting God's living water through Jesus, then we shouldn't be too surprised to see the brown water or contaminated water or funny smelling water or bug-infested water coming out of our own broken water system.

This is in part why we come together week by week on Sunday, and also why we need more regular times during the week as well. We may even know that the water we drink and use is fouled, in the spiritual sense. So we need each other, and we first of all need the Lord to show us our need. And we can simply ask him and others, "Show me my need, O God."

Then we don't have to seek the status, the prestige, the power, the self-importance that some of us often seek, many times without knowing it. This was certainly true in Jesus' time. Luke tells us in chapter 14, that Jesus had observed people choosing seats in a prominent religious leader's home for a special meal.

Now the way I understand it, the closest seat to the host was the most prestigious. I think the closest cultural equivalent is the head table at a wedding reception. You can imagine the fuss at a reception if someone who was a distant cousin or a not-so-close friend or two decided on their own that they needed to be seated at the head table, whether the bride and groom wanted them there or not.

People were seating themselves according to what they thought of themselves. Some of us have bigger egos and more confidence than others, but regardless of this, Jesus encourages us to take a lower place. Paul encourages us to not think too highly of ourselves. Now this does not mean belittling ourselves and swearing at ourselves and all manner of self-hatred. We are not called to be doormats. What it means is having a balanced view of who we are and seeking a moderate view of our position and status in life. In fact, it is better to have a little bit lower view of ourselves and have others lift us up to say "no" you are better than that, than to tell others how good we are and how far we have come, when in fact they are thinking the opposite about us. The chairs are not about where we sit.

I know Presbyterians love the back of the church, except during concerts, have you noticed that? I remember trying to get a small group in a large church building to come forward so I wouldn't feel so removed from them and so we could be closer. I failed. But really what Jesus is describing has little to do with whether you like the front of the sanctuary or the back.

It has to do with how we judge ourselves in relation to others. If I were to compare myself to Jesus in a material way, I would say I have lovely big home, two working chariots, a better income, a higher formal level of education and could easily put myself above him. Of course, this would be the most foolish way of thinking of him (and me), since our lives in the end will not be measured by such things. And we know the Lord chose to be homeless (Foxes have holes and the birds have nests but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head—Luke 9:58). He chose to be poor so we could be rich. He chose the place of no status rather than the royal way. He gave up

everything and thus received everything and more. He lived the truth that you only get to keep what you give away.

So then the question remains, "How low can we go?" when it comes to ministering to others, to caring about what God cares about, to being the Good Samaritan, the loving one. Of course our serving others comes in a right spirit only as we receive love and mercy and care ourselves.

What do we expect when we come here? What will be our legacy when our lives are over? What will the leader of your funeral service say about you? Of course you can write down in your will what you would like to have said about you, but then it is up to the person or persons whether they will actually say it or not.

A friend of mine once had an elderly mother who would speak to him about every detail of the funeral service almost every time they spoke on the phone. Eventually my friend's patience ran out and he simply said, "You know, Mom, when you are gone it is up to the rest of us as to what we will do and won't do for your funeral." And so all of us are stuck with the fact of our mortality and the possibilities, the wonderful, creative possibilities that face us this coming school year, church year, to make sure we don't miss out on what God is calling us to do, to learn, to care about, through all the highs and lows that we experience.

Let's make sure we go as low as God wants,

Let us pray.