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"Shoplifting Grace" The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (06/30/2024, The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost)

We need to talk about water bottles.

I mean, if you were alive in 1987, did you own a water bottle that accompanied you everywhere you went?

But at some point, something changed.

I think it was first the hikers and the campers with their Nalgene bottles, those large plastic opaque bottles with the attached, screw-top lid.

But they were primitive by today's standards, no insulation, no straws.

And then at some point, we moved from that to the the Yeti.

I'm skipping some of the evolution of the water bottles because we don't, frankly, have the time.

But a few years ago, everybody then had the Yeti, which was insulated and stainless steel.

And then very quickly, we moved to the Stanley, you know, Stanley, the old camping brand,

which now had the hottest fashion accessory two years ago, the Stanley Cup, not the hockey

one, the cup you put in your SUV's center console cup holder.

And then that was sweeping the nation.

And then very quickly, everybody decided that was garbage and moved to the O'Wala, which

has a built-in sort of sipping straw so you can lose your dignity either by going like

this in a meeting or like this in a meeting, two ways to lose your dignity.

So I'm not talking about the cabinet full of logo-bearing water bottles that you got

at every single event you attend.

You get swag always and the water bottles are things.

So you have a cabinet full of these.

I'm talking about these the high-end branded ones you pay a lot of money for.

We reached a real crisis.

I knew we'd hit sort of peak water bottle when this moment happened at a target in the

United States of America about a year and a half ago.
People were lined up outside before the opening of the target to get the newest color of the Stanley Cup.
They already had, it's like they didn't have any water bottles. They just needed one in this color and it was a limited edition. And people lined up before the store even opened.
It was like Black Friday but in the summertime and humans were humans and this maybe 19-year-old kid supposedly didn't see the line and went to the front and cut in the line.
And the talons came out, the claws, I mean they had to, I'm not kidding, they had to call the police because people were so incensed that this man would cut the line and they were going to tear him limb from limb for a water bottle.
Not water bottle, really a thermal insulated 32-ounce stainless steel powder coated travel tumbler but never the less.
I mean you, I know I'm don't mean to pick on anyone, I know maybe more of you have these and are captured by this craze of the water bottle and you're very hydrated and praise God for that because nothing could be more important.
So I bring this up as one of the many examples this scene outside of a target over a water bottle where people demonstrate this thing in the world that we hate. People hate it, hate it when folks cut the line.
Another example is when you're trying to, you know, when there's a sign that says, you know, lane ends in a mile, please merge now. Lane ends in half a mile, please merge now. Lane ends in 500 feet and there's, you merge dutifully a mile back because you're a law-biting God-fearing good person and then there's those scum of the earth that stay in the left lane until the last millimeter and then they just swipe over.
I know.
God hates them too.
We are so enamored with this idea of fairness and playing by the rules and people getting what they deserve and all of that sort of stuff.
You see it all kinds of things and this is not a partisan statement. Hear me now.
Believe me later.
It is not a partisan statement but one of the big things that you hear globally in the conversation about immigration is happening in Europe, it's happening in the United States everywhere.

This is happening and one of the things people say it's not fair,
essentially these people
are cutting in line.
We pay taxes for our services and we don't want other people taking
those things.
You see this also with fitness and weight loss.
There are people that worked hard and restricted calories and went to
the gym and did all the
things and lost their weight and now they are resentful of the people
with the rosempic.
They're just cutting the line, the easy path to this.
It's not fair.
We see this in churches all the time because God has this system where
you do your part
so that God will do his part.
It's fair.
You have to pray a correct prayer and really mean it.
You have to sow a seed of faith and do it with sincerity.
You have to make a public declaration.
You have to do whatever the things are that check the box so that God
will then check God's
box and it's all about fairness.
God forbid someone just get the grace without praying the right prayer
with the right sincerity,
the right time and the right place and all that sort of stuff.
That's fairness and we're obsessed with this but that's not
Christianity.
The ministry of Jesus Christ which is why we're here, why you've
gotten up early on a day
off when many people are enjoying a bagel and Sunday morning or the
crossword or whatever
here you are Sunday morning a TV show.
You're here I think unless you're forced to be here but I think and
there may be some
of you but I think you're here because you want to hear something
about God that actually
matters to you.
I can't think of anything that matters more and there are, I don't
have to tell you,
a lot of ideas out there about what God is like that I think are off
base, flat out wrong
and those ideas about God are used to shame, minimize, instill fear,
manage people's behavior
and thoughts, all kinds of things people try to use God in ways that I
think are wounding
and wrong.
And I don't think God is about hurting people.
Remember Shunato Connor may she rest in peace, the Irish singer who
rose to fame with nothing
compares to you a prince song that she made better which is not easy

to do with the
prince song.

And Shunato Connor went from Irish Roman Catholic to kind of an off-shoot Catholic branch

to at the end of her life a malgamist spiritual beliefs including
Islam and she was someone

who really couldn't quite find her spiritual home but she has a song
called Get Me To

Church which is I think one of her top three and she says Get Me To
Church not the kind

that hurts.

And there are a lot of churches that do that and that is not the
message.

The message is what we find in the Gospel of Mark chapter 5 in these
sandwich stores.

I say sandwich because you begin with one story and then you switch to
another one in

the middle and then you come back to the first story.

It's like the bread and then the PB and J in the middle.

And the first story is this synagogue leader, Jairus a rabbi of sort
whose 12-year-old

daughter is sick and at the end of her life.

They've tried everything and she is about to die.

And so this synagogue leader comes to Jesus desperate.

You see this desperation because he's an important man and he falls on
his feet before

this dusty rogue rabbi with really questionable credentials and shady
friends and yet this

important person falls on his feet and asks for help.

And then they're going to help the daughter and then we get the
middle, the second story

while they're on their way, a woman who has had menstrual bleeding for
12 years, grabs

Jesus's cloak, sneaks up behind him and grabs his cloak because she
says if I only touch

his garment I will be healed.

And she is and Jesus says who touched me and she says it was me and
then he takes time

to listen to her whole story which is why we know it.

Mark could write it down because Jesus took time to listen to her
whole story.

The 12 years, all the doctors, the failed cures, the desperation.

And then the disciples hear it, the tradition is retained and then
written in Mark's gospel

and she's healed.

And then we get back to the original story, the one of the pastors'
kid and Jesus has taken

so long in this detour with the hemorrhaging woman, he delayed his
answer to this man's

prayer and so the daughter died and everybody tells Jesus, don't

bother, it's too late
now.

And Jesus says, hold up and goes, of course, into that room where
she's lying and names
a waco non-profit to let the womb and the girl gets up and she's not
just healed from illness
but resurrected from death.

And all these stories are typically presented in such a way with
fairness in mind.

And some sort of exchange, these people had enough faith of the right
kind in the sufficient
amount that God then answered their prayers.

It's a transaction.

They had faith and God responded.

God is the divine vending machine, like the big red machine over in
the St. Almanzov

which still takes, it was two quarters, now three, I mean inflation,
am I right, three
quarters and you can get a big red.

God's like that, you just put in the right prayers and you get what
you want.

You have enough faith, you act good enough, you make good choices, you
come to church and

God will act.

And I would like to blow that up.

I would like to bust those myths, those wrong understandings.

Because if that's the truth, you would have to believe that gyros, the
synagogue leader

and this bleeding woman in some way do something good enough to get
God's favor that they
follow the rules.

And that's not really what the story shows, what the story shows is
desperate people at

the end of their rope whose lives, at least as we read them here, are
more characterized

by rule breaking than rule following.

And their faith is kind of sketchy.

The synagogue leader is betraying everything he believes by coming to
Jesus.

Jesus is the one who hangs out at the wrong places with the wrong
people.

He's very Lucy Goosey with the Sabbath and other rules that the
synagogue leader believes
are very important.

He is someone that you don't really want to be seen with in public.

That's why another fellow religious leader in that time who sneaks to
Jesus at night,

Nicodemus.

But this man is coming to Jesus, bending his own principles because
he's so desperate.

Hanging out with someone whom many saw as someone whom God would not like, remember when Jesus healed people? They said he must be doing it by the devil's power because he couldn't be doing it by God's power because he is hanging out at the biker bar with the wrong people until 2 a.m. God couldn't be working through him. And the synagogue leader goes to this very shady Jesus for help. This is desperation. I'm not sure I would call it sort of piety in faith. And here's the other thing. People again think you have to have enough faith to get God to do what you want. It's all about fairness, but this synagogue leader, his faith, he's got some, you know, his desperation slash faith, but it's sort of only up to a point. He comes to Jesus while there's still a chance. He comes to Jesus while his daughter is still breathing. And he says, you are a apparently some religious leader and I think you can help her so please would you heal her? Make her sickness go away. But as you heard, he is delayed and by the time he gets there, she's dead and that's where their faith runs out. So much so that Jesus has to invite him to believe because his faith has run out. He comes, I don't know if you ever pray to prayer that's like, I don't know if you can do this God. I don't really think you can, but if there's any chance that you're real and you might be willing to hear this, I'm saying this prayer, Amen. That's not a prayer that's full of faith. It's like a little fingernail of faith hanging on and really you kind of don't believe it. And that's where gyros is because she's dead. I mean, all hope is lost at this point, send the teacher away. And this bleeding woman, you know, she's got this poignant heartbreaking story she would have been an outcast because of her condition. Any sort of bodily fluid and the lavitical rules of the time in the Jewish faith meant she was ceremonially unclean, could not worship with her people. Couldn't touch her. And you could say she has faith, but it's clear that she sort of has faith in anything

and everything that might help.

It's not like she's got this like carry under when Jesus take the wheel sort of faith.

I mean, she's had the faith that took her to MD Anderson and the faith that took her

to the Mayo Clinic and then she went to the televangelist, then she went to the faith

healers and then she went to the palm reader on Waco Drive.

She's tried everything.

She's going to try anything and everything, whether it's the Bible or whether it's the

crystals or whatever it is.

This is again more desperation than some sort of religious pious faith.

And touching Jesus is one more desperate attempt, not some massive religious accomplishment.

If she had, you know, real Bible faith in him, she would have walked up and said, Lord,

heal me.

I believe you can.

But instead she shoplifts grace.

She sneaks up behind him in the crowd.

By the way, having to touch all kinds of people and make them unclean on her way, which

she's not going to tell them, she's like the COVID, you know, patient zero.

She's the one that flew from Beijing to Seattle in 2019 and gave it to everybody.

You know, she's just spreading this uncleanness that she works her way through the crowd.

And not like I'm sorry, I'm sorry, not saying don't touch me, don't touch me.

Jesus jostling her way through and she touches just the hem of Jesus's garment from behind.

That is not like Lord, heal me.

It's like I'm just going to, I'm not like it's kind of this little desperation.

Sneaky and she would have made Jesus unclean to the rabbi of all people by touching him.

She's cutting in line.

It's not fair.

And yet in this radical display of the grace of God, the power goes out from Jesus without

him even doing anything.

He doesn't even get to evaluate her resume or call on her references.

She just touches his cloak and she's healed.

Who touched me?

For those of you that think you need to pray super hard with the perfect motivations at

the right time of day for the right duration of prayer and quote

enough scripture to
God to get him to answer you, Almighty God, as your word says, and say
currently in six.
You know, like that kind of prayer where God's like, oh yeah, I forgot
that part in the
Bible that I wrote.
You know, that's not this.
She's sneaking up to it and stealing grace when you pray.
If your prayers aren't good, apparently they work.
God isn't even checking your credentials.
Jesus can work with people whose faith only goes up to a certain
point.
Jesus can work with people who are desperate and not that pious.
This is really, really good news and it might invite you to do
something.
It might invite you to get a little honest about your actual life.
Many of us live in a perpetual state of some level of denial about
what's actually going
on in our lives and our relationships and our family and our personal
life.
In a recent study of college professors, 94% rated themselves above
average.
And that could be any profession.
You know, people get mad about CEO pay because it keeps going up.
Because when you're hiring a CEO or an executive of an organization,
you hire a consultant
to help you and they say, well, the median pay for this position is X
dollars and you don't
want to hire somebody below the median.
You'll always pay more.
Everybody thinks they're better than they are because we're all so
deeply connected.
This idea of fairness in God rewards the good and good things come to
good people and you
got to put good energy in the world to get the good stuff to come to
you.
We're so wedded to the meritocracy.
And so we say, we're doing fine.
We're above average.
We're generous and the bleeding woman and all the people Jesus meets.
They have come to him in a place where they know they are not above
average.
They are now in a place of desperation.
And a more honest definition of what people are like comes from Paul
Simon.
I don't know if you've seen the recent documentary about him where he
really receives, it's
called Seven Psalms.
A song he's writing, this album he's writing.
He's at the end of his life and he says, I don't know where these

words are coming from
but I wake up in the middle of the night and they're with me and he
writes them down.
And he sings them.
And in one of the songs from this album he sings, I don't know a soul
who's not been battered.
I don't know.
I don't have a friend who feels at ease.
I don't know a dream that's not been shattered or driven to its knees.
When your dreams are shattered, when your faith has run out, when you
have been driven
to your knees, when you don't deserve anything, God is the one, this
is the true God.
This is what I want to leave with you today and counter all that
baloney out there.
God is the one who gives away the store, who doesn't want to see your
resume, who doesn't
need to have some quota of faith.
He's okay with desperate people who can barely pray.
He's the one who for sinful people goes to the cross before they have
gotten their lives
together.
He gives himself totally and fully before anybody deserves anything.
It's what this woman found out, and if you haven't, well, you're in
the right place.
Let us pray.
Almighty God.
Help us.
Amen.