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"They Came to Test Jesus" The Rev. Kara Leslie (10/06/2024, The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost)

Let us pray.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable unto you, O Lord, and the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we pray.

Amen.

Grantville First United Methodist Church, also known as Sarah O'Kelly's Church.

It was my first appointment in the United Methodist system while I was in seminary.

I also passed this small town church south of Atlanta, Georgia.

Sarah O'Kelly was the matriarch of the church.

She could sit on her front porch and look and see the steeple of the church and hear the

bells toll every hour and on Sunday in additional 30 minutes.

Sarah O'Kelly would sit on her front porch and rock in the white rocker that matched the

trim of her home.

And underneath the rocker was green slats of wood that matched the grass in her front

yard.

And if you had the privilege of sitting in the chair, you could look up and the ceiling

of the porch was painted sky blue.

As their pastor, Sarah O'Kelly invited me to come and sit on her porch many a time.

And I would go sit and rock back and forth and listen to Sarah tell me all about this

small town.

She was a third grade teacher for eternity and everybody.

So she knew everyone's story, what they wanted you to know, but also she knew the other

side to the stories.

Sarah was about 49 beautiful soft white curls in her hair and she had bright blue eyes.

Her smile was painted with primrose colored lipstick and her hug was as warm as her smile.

She was the matriarch of this small little church.

While I was in seminary, I learned a great deal from her.

There was one Sunday school class for adults and it was called the Miss Sarah O'Kelly Sunday

school class.

You had to be a woman of a certain age and you had to be willing to

listen to a one
hour lecture from a third grade school teacher.
She also was in the choir.
She was on every committee.
And it was Sarah O'Kelly who ran the church until I got a phone call
from her son.
He was a prominent dentist up in Atlanta and he said moms had a
stroke.
The ambulance has come to pick her up and they've taken her to
Lagrange hospital.
So I was in the parsnid which is the house where the pastor lives
right behind the church.
That in my car drove 30 minutes late on the Tuesday afternoon to see
Sarah O'Kelly.
And I got to the hospital room and the grown children were pacing up
and down outside
the door because they'd never been in a situation like this.
I mean mom had never gotten sick.
She had taken care of their father.
She had taken care of all the in-laws but now she was sick and in the
hospital.
They were anxious.
They were nervous.
They had no idea what was going to happen.
I shook their hands, said the pleasantries and then I walked in the
door to see Sarah O'Kelly.
She was in the bed with a hospital gown on and wires and lights all
around her.
Being four foot nine, she barely filled up half of the bed.
The room was softly lit and I could barely see her face.
But I could tell she was scared.
Very scared.
I could see it in her eyes but I could also hear it in her voice
because it was so weak
and the words were jumbled after this person has a stroke that often
happens.
Now as a pastor I was taught both in seminary and in my residency
prior to going to seminary
about how to be a chaplain.
I knew the rules and the right way to do it.
You walk in, you introduce yourself, you act very professional.
I knew all the ways and the protocol.
It was going through my head, what to do.
I mean she is the matriarch.
But then when I saw her she had reached out her little frail hand and
padded the bed.
All these things are going through my head and her little hand said
come and sit beside me.
I reached for her hand, I held it and I sat down on the edge of her
bed.

We didn't talk much with words that we spoke tremendous kindness with the warmth of our hands.
I said a prayer and then I went on my way.
You know sometimes we have expectations and protocols and things in our minds that we think we should follow but sometimes they don't benefit us.
We follow the rules and the laws but then something happens, life goes weird, gets off track
or some money reaches forward and pats the edge of the bed.
And we have a choice, we have a choice right then to be present and be held or to be stuck
in those old rules and what they tell us to do.
In other words do we let the childlike desires and needs of our souls lead us as we go about making decisions in our lives.
In our reading from Mark there are many difficult issues mentioned. I cannot deny the power nor the pain of them, adultery, divorce, ego which is also known as edging out of God, test and more test, laws, certificates, commandments and hardness of heart.
If you are expecting a very judgmental and harsh sermon about divorce and relationships then please know right now that your expectations will not be met.
As a woman who is divorced these verses are very painful to hear. A divorce is always the last choice and no matter how nice it is, it is traumatic.
It is the greatest failure of my life but staying would have also been a huge failure.
If you've gone through one or someone you know has gone through it then you can understand what I'm talking about.
So please know that this morning as we explore this passage of Mark it comes from a deep place of prayer and reflection.
There are three groups in our passage this morning that approach Jesus in the gospel of Mark.
The first are the Pharisees and they come to quote test Jesus. This isn't the first time and they ask Jesus a question and Jesus in his true fashion turns around and gives them another question.
The Pharisees answer the question by saying well this is the way we've always done it.
The law is the law.
It's black and it's white, it's right and it's wrong and it's going to strangle you
and if you're only, if you can just breathe a little bit that'll be okay.
And Jesus looks at them and honestly says you have hard hearts.

Oh you literal, small, expecting the law to give you what you need people.
Jesus answers them harshly.
Jesus moves from outside the community into a home and is hoping for some relief from these difficult narrow-minded people.
But even in the house his helpful 12 disciples continue to ask him the question.
Jesus answers with some very difficult words.
No longer have we gone from two and to one but now a man can get divorced and a woman can get divorced.
But I want to know why do the disciples ask again?
Are they just wanting to bring the fight from outside inside?
You know sometimes how we have fights at work difficult and we just bring it on home?
Or the disciples needing clarity?
Maybe they're looking for a reason to judge and be hurtful.
Or could it be that they need a way to feel better about their marriage or their relationships that they left when they followed Jesus?
The last group to approach Jesus are the children who are sent by the parents.
The little children come up to him so that he could touch them, lay his hands on them and hold them and bless them.
It is not the followers nor the disciples, but the children who are the ones who are needy.
They're unprotected, they're in mature and they are dependent.
Those are the ones who are welcomed.
Why does the kingdom of God belong to the little children simply because they need it?
This kingdom is not one to come, but it is right there with Christ, right there, and it is here with us.
We are invited to be like children, to come seeking companionship, forgiveness, grace and mercy and love in our Savior.
If the people came with expectations of Jesus making them line up and speaking sternly to them and their children, then they were big time disappointed.
I would even say they were shocked by his grace and mercy.
This story has three different groups, but truthfully we all have every one of these inside of us.
We all have a part in our beings that truly believe if we could just follow the rules and then our lives would be okay.
Our value is dependent on our work and our ability to be good Christians.

And on the occasion when life gets ugly, and we make bad choices, if we do what the rules tell us then it will get back to that good, it will be okay. But our hearts grow cold and dry and unkind. Sometimes you can think if I really follow the law, then surely everyone else should. We enjoy the power of the law, the power that it gives us over others. And our hearts and our focus and our relationships can be hardened by the misuse of this power. We fail to see that the one sitting right next to us is the one who is inviting us to the table. We fail to see that Jesus, who has forgiven our sin, has also forgiven the sins of the whole world. And it is Jesus who longs for us to trust his power in our lives. Jesus has don't be so inflexible, rigid and resistant. There is a better way, me. Like the disciples in the story, we too can become self-righteous and focus on our way of doing faith. We want to be in the church and of the church and do the church thing, but our grace is only for those who are like us. Who believe like us, who vote like us. Jesus overturns the disciples way of thinking and invites them to see that being like a child, powerless and needy and completely dependent on God is the way and the truth and the life. And then there is that part in all of us that wants to be childlike. But we stand back and we find excuses to not come and sit at his feet. We dare think that the lap of our Savior could possibly handle all our hate and hurt and habits. Yes, if we were small little ones with no issues, no trust wounds, no pain, then of course we could climb on up into our Savior's lap and nestle in his robes and feel the warmth of his presence. Most of us come with lots of worry and anxiety and stinking, thinking and ego. And Jesus says with an indignant tone that the little children are welcome. To receive the kingdom of God as a child is to depend in trustful simplicity on God. And expectations fall away as you allow yourself to come and be held by the truest lover of your soul. It is not in the Pharisees nor the disciples, but it is in the neediness of the children that we experience a way open for the love of God.

So as I conclude, I want to share a story that happened last Sunday in Sunday school.

I enjoy teaching Sunday school and I taught the fourth and fifth graders for most of September.

I enjoy teaching them and it was about the book of Esther.

And one of the great things in his church is that the curriculum that we use in the Sunday

school is also the same readings that you hear on Sunday.

So very often the children will say, oh, I heard that and I heard that in church.

I'm like, oh, please, somebody is listening out there.

And so we were talking about the queen Esther.

It's a difficult book and how she got to be queen is not an easy story.

It's one that requires delicate truth if you understand what I mean.

Now there are a few things that I enjoy when I'm teaching Sunday school.

I read the lesson.

I have an outline.

I communicate with my team.

And you know, I have some order, some protocol, if you will.

Well, there are three things that I enjoy doing when I'm part of that are part of my protocol.

And one is we pray.

Two, we get the bibles off the shelf.

Open them up.

Learn where the book is that we're looking at and read out loud.

All the children read scripture out loud.

And then the third thing is I'll always throw in something about vegetables.

It's not always in that order, but that's kind of where we go.

And so we had talked about queen Esther and her difficult story.

And we were at the end.

It was getting me snack time.

And you know, those last 15 minutes just kind of blow by you.

And you're like, wait, how that happens so fast?

And the parents were all lining up.

And so I told the girls, there's one boy.

And I told all the girls and said, everybody, let's put the bibles up.

And the boy comes from a family of all boys, no sisters whatsoever.

And he's the oldest of the siblings.

And so while we're putting up the bibles and focused on, you know, tidying up everything, this little boy goes and finds a little friend in the corner.

It's black, it's got long legs and it jumps.

And so he picks up the cricket and puts it on his shirt,

which, you know, a dark colored cricket stands in,

it's a pretty stark contrast to a light denim shirt.

And he has the cricket crawl.

Yeah, you know, it's on him and he's walking toward the girls,

which includes me and the other teacher.
And he's walking towards us and then the cricket jumps.
And then the cricket starts to crawl up his shirt, all of us scream.
Every one of us girls just scream.
And the parents are outside in the hallway and they are so curious.
What is happening in that Sunday school class?
The energy and the room, it is contagious.
We are loud, we are laughing, we're screaming.
And the joy of a child blesses us all.
Amen.