

Isaiah 56:1,6-8

Matthew 15:10-28

Romans 11:1-2a,29-32

“God is gracious to us and blesses us and
makes God’s face shine upon us.” AMEN!

(Sing!) “Well the good old days

May not return

The rocks might melt and
the sea may burn

I’m learning to fly (learning to fly)

But I ain’t got wings (learning to fly)

Coming down (learning t fly)

Is the hardest thing”

That song brought together Tom Petty and
the Heartbreakers for the release of their 1991
album *Into the Great Wide Open*.

And “learning to fly” struck me as relevant
to the lessons assigned today.

Legend has it that Tom got the idea for the song
when he saw an interview with a young, and
brand new, pilot.

She said that learning to fly wasn't hard to do,
except for the landing.

That part is hard.

And thus it reminded me of my days
as a student at FSU.

In 1989 was living in the fraternity house
during my sophomore year and one of
the older brothers in the fraternity was
a pilot working to get flight time hours
in pursuit of a job with an airline.

He invited me to go up with him a Cessna
to practice maneuvers for about an hour.

On the way to the airport, we talked about flying
and I told him that I'd done quite a bit of it
as a passenger and love to fly,
except for the taking off and
the landing part. :-)

He nodded thoughtfully and said,
"Unfortunately, to fly, one must do both."

(Sing) Coming down is the hardest thing. (Pause)

Jesus illustrates "coming down" in several ways
in today's gospel.

He was heading away from Jerusalem and
he was taking his disciples into foreign territories.

Then an unnamed Canaanite woman shouted,
“Have mercy on me Lord, my daughter
is tormented by a demon.”

Surprisingly, Jesus ignored her shouts and pleas.

Did he ignore her because she was a woman, or
because she was Canaanite (both?).

Was it because she was a person who
was being punished by God, for why else
would her daughter have a demon
lest she was being punished?

That was the thinking and teaching of that era.

The truth is, we don't know why he ignored her and
we don't know why he eventually
said the words he said.

Some might say he did what he did
to teach his disciples, and us,
a lesson in mercy.

Like something a good professor might do
to stimulate dialogue with the students,

(You know like playing devil's advocate)

but I think that might let Jesus off the hook
a little too much, here.

But, there's discomfort in understanding Jesus' behavior
in this account because we like to consider
him perfect from the get go.

Yet, why not at least consider that Jesus
might have thought his ministry to be
first and foremost to the Israelites?

They are God's people, after all.

And if that's the way Jesus understood his purpose
then it's not hard to fathom that Jesus may
have been the one needing to learn

The one needing to learn about
God's unbounded love and broad
mercy, in a new way.

Like an unfinished, but still learning person.

Could Jesus had been imperfect as he
went along teaching, healing, and
correcting religious leaders?

Are we allowed to consider such an interpretation?

After all, we believe him to be human, as much as divine.

So, this encounter could be a message to us of
Jesus learning something very important,
very new and from a least expected person,
even learning it the hard way. (Pause)

When Elinor was a child she loved
when books ended with the words
happily ever after.

She would hold the book close to her chest
after reading those words and say,
“That’s the way life should be.”

As she grew older, Elinor began to put together
her own perfect ending.

It would arrive when she finished university...
then when she found work she loved...
then finding the perfect mate...
a little home all their own...

Happily every after.

And, you know, some of them came true.

Then the roof leaked,
the spouse lost their job,
her dad became ill,
a friend betrayed her trust.

Arguments over dumb things
happened with the love of her life.

“This can’t be the ending I’ve planned,”
she said to herself. (Pause)

People speak of happily ever after
as if it’s a place to finally arrive at
and when you get there you’re able to close
the gate behind you and lock it,

So that nothing hard, hurtful, or grief riddled can happen.

I think that way sometimes, too.

But a life that never changes ceases to grow.

We all want it to stay good... happy.

Yet, love deepens when we survive hard days.

Courage appears when we come back
from errors in judgment and mistakes
spoken out loud.

Gratitude becomes real because
we know how loss feels. (Pause)

With the Canaanite woman’s persistence,
on behalf of her troubled daughter,
she prodded Jesus to see that God’s

kingdom of heaven was going to be much deeper
than perhaps he even thought.

And that kingdom would reach far more people
than maybe he even imagined.

Jesus knew that kingdom was present,
perhaps he just needed to be prodded
to understand it is broader than he thought.
(Pause)

And so, why shouldn't Jesus make
bad decisions and say hurtful things?

The good news is, he admits he was wrong.

He broadened his mind to see more fully
what God is up to through him.

And with the woman's persistence he was shown
that even the dogs (all of us, really)
eat the crumbs that fall from
their master's table, and
Jesus recognized her "great faith."

The hardest part is coming down. (Pause)

Today, we celebrate and welcome
new members into St. Stephen.

Following the service we have a congregation
meeting where we will hear news about
our financial condition.

And, I am happy to say we are more financially
stable than other years, but
there's no happily ever.

In the fall, we will still fill out estimate of giving cards,
challenge each other to give in ways
that foster our spirituality.

I am sure we will find that prices for
air conditioning and heating will rise.

There's still hurricane season,
an election in November, and
important advocacy work to continue.

We will have days when we are tired,
periods of anger and frustration, and heartbreak.

We will need to be reminded to love,
to forgive, and to have courage to begin again.

And we will... and it will be good... because that's life.

Together, that's how we learn to fly.

AMEN!

