

“Boo Radley’s Porch”

Mark 1:40-45

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Saint Paul, Minnesota

The Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Prayer: *In the quietness of these moments, O God, startle us by your presence. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing your word we may see and know Jesus the Christ, and better understand his will for our lives. We ask this in his name. Amen.*

Back in the day when televisions were black and white and came with thirteen channels on the dial, only three of which offered programming, there was a station in our city that showed movies in the late morning before the afternoon programming of soap operas and game shows began. I was home from school, sick and on the sofa watching television when the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* came on. I hadn’t yet read the book in school, but the movie captivated me then like it does each year when I re-watch it, usually during the summer in Michigan.

Told from the perspective of children, the book and film, as you know, deal with powerful human forces. Innocence in a changing world. Race, justice and fear, which are not unrelated. Set against the trial of a black man, Tom Robinson, accused to raping a white woman, Atticus Finch has his hands full. A small town lawyer in the poor, segregated south, he is defending Tom Robinson while raising two young children, Jem and Scout, as a widower. Boo Radley, the elusive and therefore mysterious grown son of the Finch’s neighbors, becomes the object of fascination and intrigue for the children during those lazy summer days.

Atticus is aware of their fixation on Boo Radley and he keeps telling his children to leave the Radleys alone. It reminded me of my own childhood and of Old Man Dutler, who had a small farm in the city where it was rumored he’d shoot buck shot out of a rifle at any kids who stepped foot on his property, especially if they were trying to steal his grapes. We’d spend hours plotting and scheming, not to mention crawling through the weeds and brush at the back of his property, like commandos, not trying to steal his grapes, but to just get close enough to get a look at him and his gun. We were as fixated on Old Man Dutler as the kids in *To Kill a Mockingbird* are with Boo Radley.

In that small town where racial tensions were running high, Atticus also teaches his children the powerful lesson that they shouldn’t judge people until they’ve had an opportunity to climb into their skin and walk around for a while. That applied to Tom Robinson but also to Boo Radley and poor Mr. Cunningham who couldn’t afford to pay Atticus for the legal work he’d done for him and who instead with food from his garden.

His real name, of course, is Arthur Radley, but Boo seems to fit, especially when you remember how Jem describes him. Having never seen or met him, Jem describes him this way to the other neighborhood children,

Boo was about six-and-a-half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that’s why his hands were bloodstained—if you ate an animal raw, you could never wash the blood off. There was a long jagged scar that ran across his face; what teeth he had were yellow and rotten; his eyes popped, and he drooled most of the time.

Thinking about Boo and talking about him gave those kids a thrill, like telling ghost stories around a campfire. And because they’d never met him, they were free to make it up and let their imaginations run wild. And of

course, you know the wonderful story. It is the object of their imagination and fear, who ends up saving Jem's life when he's attacked.

And then at the end, as her brother Jem is in bed, unconscious from the attack, Boo Radley appears to Scout. And she looks at this one she has feared and been fixated on for so long, and she talks to him. And she realizes that she was wrong about him—that he is none of the things they had imagined. But she does more than that. She extends her hand to him and walks him home and up onto the Radley's front porch, where she enters territory she's seen all her life but has never entered. And when Arthur has gone inside, Scout turns around on the Radley's porch and looks out—out on her city street and town and sees it the way the Radleys see it. And then she says,

Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them. Just standing on the Radley porch was enough.

Well, stories that strike universal themes and truths, such as this one, will never go out of fashion. They will always strike a cord and I couldn't help but thinking about *To Kill a Mockingbird* as I read today's text from Mark.

One time Jesus encountered a leper who begged him for healing. "If you choose, you can make me clean." And while leprosy in the Bible covers a wide range of skin ailments, the real issue with it was that it violated the ritual purity laws. In other words, there was a moral stigma attached to having the disease and scripture went to great lengths describing how lepers were to be treated and how the clean were to avoid contact with them lest they too become unclean. And you can just imagine how children in the first century would have been as fascinated by the lepers outside the city gates as Jem and Scout were with Boo Radley.

But Jesus' response to the leper is an interesting one. It's translated saying that Jesus agreed to heal him because he was moved with pity. Many scholars, however, believe that a more accurate translation, based on the Greek, would be that Jesus was moved less out of pity and more out of anger—and visceral anger at that. A literal translation of it could be rendered that it made his stomach turn. Jesus experienced something far deeper than superficial pity. He was physically moved by this man's plight. It hit him in his gut and he was outraged by it.

And why was he so angry? Because the man was sick? Perhaps in part. But I think what really angered Jesus that day was the unfair treatment of that leper by society and the religion, and the irrational fear that used its sacred texts and traditions to justify and validate its exclusion and demonizing of one already vulnerable. When those who are the weakest and most in need of help and compassion, become further victimized by the cruel, uncaring and fearful majority, interested only in their own comfort and safety, Jesus found himself taking it all in, internalizing it as if he had put on this man's skin and walked around in it, and it outraged him.

Never mind the adulterer who does what he does behind closed doors. Never mind the embezzler who does what she does when no one is looking. The person with the deformed face and hand, the person bearing the scar or the open wound that cannot be hidden, those who are "different" become easy targets for those insecure, pathetic souls who need such scapegoats. And it was all so unfair and unnecessary, grounded in ignorance and fear. Only a small percentage of people were capable of coming down with leprosy in the first place and even then, it wasn't easy to get. But it was different. It wasn't appealing to look at. And it was scary in much the same way as AIDS when it was first diagnosed. And fear that gets left alone and remains in the dark, only fuels itself.

You know how it is. I look at the Presbyterian Church today and see those who are promoting schism and going to great lengths to leave—those who are guilty of the sinful stewardship of everyone’s time and resources just because they don’t agree that all churches should be free to discern the Spirit’s leading in electing their own leadership. I have been a part of many conversations with those who are upset and in a way, it’s been like like standing on Boo Radley’s porch for me, as I try to understand where they are coming from. And while I applaud those who want to be in such conversation across theological divides, I am sickened in my gut by those who call me a brother in Christ and then go to great lengths to walk away, wanting nothing to do with me or our denomination.

Standing on Boo Radley’s porch will open your eyes, but it might also make your stomach turn depending on what you discover there.

When we lived in Columbus, Ohio, I went on the board of Planned Parenthood, a move about which everyone in the church seemed to have an opinion. Apparently lots of other church folks had strong feelings about it as well based on the hate mail and occasional death threat I’d receive, and by the way I would get regularly vilified on the “Christian” radio station in town. But I spent several hours one day at one of our clinics, where women’s health screenings were being done and where mammograms were being offered and family planning advice and help were being given. And seeing the people in the waiting room—seeing those poor people, mostly young people but not all, who had come to receive that kind of care—care they needed and yet care they couldn’t afford if they had to pay for it, and care they couldn’t get anywhere else, was an eye opening experience for me. It was like standing on Boo Radley’s porch and the world looks differently once you’ve stood there.

Our *Sunday Series* guest this afternoon, Sister Helen Prejean, is certainly someone who has stood on Boo Radley’s porch by entering the world of death row and the skin of convicted murderers *not* by condoning what they’ve done, but by being moved in her gut and offering them compassion and grace in the face of the State’s own bloody hands carrying out the public’s revenge in order to satisfy yet another irrational fear. And as someone who has made many death row visits myself, I can tell you that I will never see our legal system or justice system the same way again. I just can’t.

Participants on mission trips to Colombia and South Africa and to Chicago’s south side, will never see the world the same way after those experiences. And I know that many of you have had similar, life altering experiences through your work with the homeless at Project Home, entering the lives of those who are very different from yourselves and whose situation in life you can’t imagine. But your gracious presence there and in their lives even if for a night, has been like standing on Boo Radley’s porch for you, causing you to see and understand the world more fully, more humanely than you did when you didn’t know the name of single homeless person. And perhaps like Jesus, you too felt something sick in your gut about the whole mess?

It’s convenient to ignore that which we refuse to see and it’s easy to hate those whom we fear.

And I fear the kind of political rhetoric we’re going to hear during this presidential election. Because it is not enough anymore to disagree with your political opponents. Now you must also demonize them. Make them less patriotic, hostile to religion, immoral and even un-American. It used to be said that money was the mother’s milk of politics, and that’s still largely true and unfortunately, in increasingly unhealthy ways. But the money in politics is also incestuously related to fear and anxiety which go together and feed on each other in ways that I’m afraid will make us all sick by next November, or at least far less healthy as a nation.

And I don't know what to do about it. But I've been asking myself all week, on whose porch do I need to stand? Into whose skin do I need to climb, and into whose shoes do I need to stand and walk around in for a while? I would encourage you to ask yourself that same thing.

Jesus was so moved by the unfair, dehumanizing plight of that leper that he actually reached out and touched him. He took into his own being the man's situation and he healed him, but not before he touched the one who was considered unclean, thereby becoming unclean himself.

To live like that, I think, will perhaps require that from time to time we need to go where we've not been before, touch what we've avoided touching, feel what we've been afraid of feeling, and see those who are sometimes standing right in front of us.

Amen.