

“Ruffled”

Rev. Jonathan Carey Goodell, August 20th 2023

I am part of a group of guys. We have been threatening each other with taking on the topic of grumpiness this year. This sermon is my warm up! SO watch out guys... And it's all because of today's passage.

What do you think about grumpiness? Would you call yourself grumpy 10... 40... 80 percent of the time?

We sometimes let Jack Nicholson ... or coach Roy in Ted Lasso ... be our grumpy icons. ... without identifying it in our personal way in the world. But you may be forgetting your (internal) eye roll when someone makes a demand. Your ironic detachment, your gossipy patterns with friends... all of these can be a measure of your grumpiness. And then grumping can just spill out... as it did for me just a couple of days ago when I was checking my phone, looking down, walking around the corner of bookends and met a teen on a bike on the sidewalk.

Like a botanist, I thought I would start by cataloguing grumpiness. Maybe you can help me with this list.

Grumpiness 501

It keeps things light ... if I can grump about that politician or baseball player I don't have to get to something more personal.

Grumpiness 401

When the juicier parts of my life are waning a little it gives me a jolt of juice, a feeling of being alive.

Grumpiness 301

When my memory is no longer the memory that I thought I had ... and I can't remember my filing system or even your name ... it lets me duck and cover by introducing a little fear into the relationship.

Grumpiness 201

It gives me the anchor of a few good convictions shaped long ago... when I have gone soft on most of the current foundations of my heart and our lives.

Grumpiness 101

It can add a note of comedy into almost any circumstance. And here is a list of things I have witnessed. grumping about people who push buttons and then walk. Grousing over dog walkers who leave brightly colored packets around natural spaces. Having something to chat about after the party such as the couple who makes way too much of their kids and grandkids. Theoretically speaking... can you offer any other grumpy topics that you might have heard?

Jesus seems to be verifiably grumpy in today's passage. Betsy gave me her most sympathetic look when I told her the gospel reading for this Sunday.

I want to give you the setting for the passage and then ask you to weigh in on Jesus' words to an unnamed Canaanite woman.

What do I hear? We are in the last year of Jesus' ministry. Jesus the reformer is crossing swords with the Pharisee reformers. Fix your life ceremonially say the Pharisees. Get the pattern of your life in order. Follow the Torah. Jesus answers back: it's the heart that matters... the law is only a pathway to the human heart. And that heart must be cleansed and renewed. If you follow the law insincerely and don't give your heart to God, then what good are the laws at all?!

Jesus LOOK AT THE INSIDE, LOOK AT THE HEART ... this is the measure that matters. To the disciples who are sitting on the fence with Jesus' critics, Jesus says plainly: "It is not the outside ceremony but the interior attitude that really matters. Leave them alone!"

This is our first application from the passage. What is grumpiness really? When I can grump about politics or dog owners or the weather ... isn't it true that I am really avoiding a matter of the heart... a fear, an anger, a loss of control, an idol of some kind that I won't face or give over to Jesus, the master of my heart?

Grumpiness is all about the outside of the cup... the thing out there that we can agree to be angry about. But what happens if you look deeper?

In the basement of the soul you may find a fear that haunts you, or an anger. The stuff of the ancient fairy tales... a famished woman asking to be fed. Vulnerable

children following a trail of bread crumbs. An ogre of anger in the dream sky. A goblin dwarf who visits every night.

Grumpiness lets us manage our fears and angers, keep them in control, but never dealt with. But there is a profound reality that can bring us to a very good place.

Resistance and demands of all kinds cause Jesus and his disciples to withdraw... possibly so that they can listen again after all the noise. And so they travel into Gentile territory. They move from the brightness and clarity of Jewish identity into the unknown, where the sights, smells and expectations are obscure. And even there, when they have planned the perfect get away, they are set upon by a woman with needs, a woman who will not be silenced. Our text says she is shouting. In fact let's listen again to the text.

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that moment.

Now we are going to puzzle a little about Jesus' response to the woman. In fact I am going to ask you to vote your interpretation.

There are three ideas of what was going down for Jesus in this dialogue with the woman. Let's listen to it again.

Jesus was tired and grumpy.

Jesus was mirroring, for the sake of the disciples, the rough and rude qualities of the disciples' hearts.

Jesus was testing the woman's faith as a teacher.

Let's look at her for a moment.

She makes a powerful 'turn' in the way she receives Jesus' comments.

From hostile to gracious

From disengaged to covenantal

From tradition/fearful/conservative to faithful/risk taking/engaged

She is here for a reason. She is being brought in front of us to awaken something inside us. She is here to awaken our awareness of our vulnerability and need. She is the famished woman who comes up from the basement of our soul asking asking and asking.

Prayer is about something real. It is about the anger, the dread, the outright fear, the need, the hope that comes up from behind and knocks.

Prayer is like this, said Jesus. It is the request of a neighbor who has had a visitor knock on his door and who needs bread. He will risk his relationship with his neighbor by asking in the middle of the night for a loaf of bread, getting him out of bed and waking the kids and the livestock, setting the dogs to barking.

Prayer is about something real that can't be avoided.

Prayer is like this, said Jesus. It is the widow who must get a hearing from the judge on her critical situation. Won't she go day after day after day?

Prayer is not casual or full of pastel phrases. It is hot and angular and clear.

Most of all, prayer presumes the interest of God, the love of God. This is where the turn that the Canaanite woman makes is remarkable, it's where she is truly an example. Jesus seems to be the disinterested neighbor ... even the hard hearted judge. But she parables with him and reminds him of his own religious character,

his own tradition of covenant, his own vision of a God in relationship with us. She believes in a God FOR us. She sees that God in the commitments and teaching and ministry of this remarkable man ... OUR savior, lord and friend.

While unnamed, our canaanite woman wins Jesus' interest, Jesus' attention, Jesus' love. She proves the truth of his theology that God makes the sun to shine on, the rain to fall on, the just and the unjust without distinction.

But this unnamed woman the canaanite woman is here for a reason.

AND... She is tutoring us in a life that is awake... awake to pain, alert to sorrow, alive to connection and energized toward hope. She is our antidote to grumpiness. She tears us away from the inner sloth that would rather gossip about our anger than suffer it and offer it to God again as part of our relationship with the Divine, and with God's purpose in the world.

I find myself asking, do I want what she has? Do I want her beautiful authenticity and grace? Do I want her vital relationship with God through Jesus?

One way to answer that question is to focus on a stillness and vulnerability that is always present.

Richard Rohr, in his great book Falling Upward talks about the shift from a first half of life focus on achievement to a second half of life focus of receptiveness. We spend our first half building. And then we may discover that the great things in life are less about us as individuals, and more about the gifts of this beautiful world, the power of community, the presence of God.

In uncovering that presence of God, we may need to fast, put aside, our gossipy grumpiness. We may need to seek for the authentic impulse in our hearts that we hide from.

Having said that, we may also need to practice the moment when we hear the still small voice of God, the sound of silence, the place of simplicity. It may actually be a moment when the basement ruckus of our hearts comes rumbling up the stairs and spilling over into our conscious mind and heart.

I say all this quite gently because I am guessing that there is something that could be shouting at you in your life. All it takes is a quiet place, a moment of stillness and your KNOWING that it is real and that it is not going away and that you desperately need Jesus as your covenant partner, the one who assures you that God is not a bureaucratic judge or a distracted, sleepy neighbor. God is listening. God is available. God is on your side.

I would like to finish with a moment of silence. And then a prayer for you, for us.