

Relationship, Relationship, Relationship

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

Luke 5:8-11

Matt Matthews, pastor

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I did not want to rush away from this story in Luke's gospel about the calling of those fishermen at the edge of that lake. Here's a snippet:

Luke 5:8-11 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

In this story, Jesus is inviting these fishermen into a relationship. Ginny Barksdale, an old colleague, mentor, friend, (hero, healer, teacher, paver-of-my-way, saint) told me once that, "Ministry is relationship, relationship, relationship." I believe those words are near the heart of the Spiritual Life. That's what began at that lake in Luke's gospel: Jesus invited Peter, James, and John into a holy friendship. *Relationship, relationship, relationship.*

I've been nurtured by many holy friendships. My parents and wider family, my pastor and the 'older' people in my Presbyterian church growing up, a few memorable teachers (and many more who go unremembered), peers, and many others. Chester Brown, the pastor at the nearby Hampton Baptist Church, was one of those people.

When I was fifteen, Bret Godfrey was one of my closest friends. When his parents were killed in a tragic helicopter crash when we were in tenth grade, an older girl in our neighborhood came to my house and told my mother that I needed to come to the Godfrey home. I was needed, she said. I was also terrified. What good could I possibly do? *I was fifteen-years-old*, too young to matter.

I didn't know Bret's dad well at all. Bill Godfrey was Lt. Commander of the USS San Francisco as it was being built in the nearby Newport News Shipyard. He was a friendly guy, but the kind of man that teenagers called *sir*. Virginia Godfrey had a ready smile. She made the pizza dough for our teenage gatherings on Friday nights. I have a picture of the pizzas we made. Bret's parents were cool in that they were 'there for us' but generally stayed out of our way, which made them cooler. We were swaggering know-it-all teens out to have a good time and in little need of adult supervision. (Though we often needed a ride and some cash.)

My memories blur of that season of shock and grief. Days before the funeral, I asked Bret's pastor, Chester Brown, who was a family friend of my folks, what should I do? How could I help Bret?

Chester was standing in Bret's front yard with a few other men from the church. He had practically lived at the house during those long hours as family from around the world gathered, and as boat-loads of Navy friends came to offer condolences; these were often very young men, and they often sobbed. We all looked wrecked, not the least of all Chester.

I'll never forget what Chester said. Both his presence during those days and his answer became part of my call to become your pastor. "Just be his friend," Chester said.

The best way I could help Bret was to *just* be his friend.

At the edge of Lake Gennesaret—what is more widely known as the Sea of Galilee—Jesus is inviting Peter, James, and John into a relationship, a friendship, a kin-ship that would change the world. Jesus wanted to make relations right with God. And that also meant making things right with each other. *Relationship, relationship, relationship.*

Neighbors and family descend on the Godfrey home on O’Canoe in Hampton, Virginia. They brought food, flowers, stories and remembrances, tears, helping hands, and a steady presence. They bore the love of God to the Godfrey clan. It was a beautiful, sad, sad time.

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Thirty-seven-years after that stormy summer, we gathered at Chester and Mary Etta Brown’s house out in the country on Sarah’s Creek, across the York River from Yorktown, for a small reunion. It was Bret, his wife, his sister, a motorcycle-riding friend from Illinois, and me. Chester and Mary Etta fed us fresh seafood at lingering suppers around their ample table. Their dogs begged for attention. We walked out on the pier at night to gaze at stars. We ate, washed dishes, cat napped, caught up, noted the coming and going of the tides. We talked a little about that long-ago summer, each of us taking our own fragment of that story at its edges and holding it up to the light. It was a time weighted with grace. *Relationship, relationship, relationship.*

When I got back home, I wrote this song.

And it’s my sermon today.

Sarah’s Creek

Matt Matthews

Chester Brown and his lovely Mary Etta
opened their hearts and their old Virginia home.
The years have flown, life has been a great adventure.
We grew up here long ago.

When we were kids, he had been our pastor.
We raised some hell on those Saturday nights.
Then came the news—we were shattered by disaster.
Sixteen years old; we didn’t know what to do.

Chorus:

Now here we are together on Sarah’s Creek.
Thirty-seven years later and the watermelon’s sweet.
Our laughter rises; water fills our eyes.
Memories float like fireflies.
On Sarah’s creek.

Bret became a teacher, he married a teacher, too.
His kids have all grown up; mine have, too.
I became a preacher; I do the best I can.
We tell our kids about Reverend Brown, how he took us by the hand.

Bridge:

On that summer night long ago when it all went down.
Neighbors all came out, church people they gathered around.
We hardly had the strength to stand; didn’t know what to say.
We all looked to Chester Brown who said, “Why don’t we pray?”

Chorus

Chester Brown loves this water; he loosens up his tie.
Tells us the history of his neighbors and these tides.
Gracious Mary Etta pours the cups of tea.
I think I hear angel wings . . .
I think I see eternity.

Chorus

—Greer, SC, after a trip to Chester's Lillaston Landing, Hayes, VA, June 2016