

Last week, I told y'all about Ken, the man from Mercy Church who lived in a train engine. Well, today I want to tell y'all a little more about Mercy Church and the people that came and saw what we got up to there. There was the guy from Louisiana, Julien, who used to be a chef. He loved to cook, and was brought up knowing the best way to show someone you loved 'em was to cook 'em good food. Katrina dislodged him from New Orleans, and he found his new home under a bridge in Little Rock. For a cajun, being that far north was like living amongst Yankees. Anyway, one day Julien asked why our afternoon services always had coffee and cookies but never anything more substantial. "Don't you love these people?" he asked, "'cause if you do, you better make 'em some gumbo..." and then, if I'm honest, I couldn't understand most of the rest of the patois that came flowing out but I did catch important words like dirty rice and etouffee. So, the former Soviet Bloc social worker took him to Krogers and loaded up on supplies. The next Tuesday, he had the run of that industrial kitchen and filled the halls of Christ Church with the aroma of Tony Chachere's and the jubilant sounds of zydeco. His soul beamed through his smiling eyes, and Mercy Church feasted on love.

Another person, Bernadette is her name, had found herself in an apartment for the first time in her life, and she used her new station to help other women get to the safety of a closed door. It's hard for anyone living without a home, but it's especially hard for women. Bernadette knew that all too well. Her apartment was close to the church, which gave her a handy place to hang out when someone else in the apartment complex set off the fire alarms with a burned bag of popcorn. This was a somewhat regular occurrence. Bernadette didn't have a spare room or a guest suite. But she did have a couch, and there were few nights when that couch sat empty. She offered that couch up more times than I've put on my collar and became the Grande Dame of Downtown Little Rock known for a home as open as her heart. Seemed like every time Mercy Church met, she brought another woman with her, showing refuge in this very stormy world.

But it wasn't all inspirational stories of God's love. We had a rule at Mercy Church: Everyone's allowed to have a bad day. In other words, you can come in drunk. You can come in high. You can be mean or angry or whatever. And you're still welcome. You're allowed to have a bad day. For one thing, so what? You don't get in trouble here for being human. And for another, homelessness is hard, and it pushes you to say things and act in ways you'd really rather not. So who knows what's brewing in you when you finally get your two-hour breather in that basement church? You don't have to feel good. You don't have to feel especially faithful. You don't even have to participate. You can sit on the couch and stew or breathe or grumble. That's okay. You're allowed to have a bad day. Or a whole string of 'em for that matter. God can handle it, and so can we.

But, the single hardest thing I've ever done in my ministry came out of that idea at Mercy Church. We were so clear with everyone that we were open and loving and made space for bad days. We were so careful to create a wide-open atmosphere, and it was catching. I don't know if you know this, but homeless people tend to have a very fine tuned radar for when folks are up to something. And Mercy Church, over and over, Mercy Church passed that test. We had a reputation for being the kinds of Christians that actually believed what we said and acted like it. So, when Stella showed up (not her real name), things got tricky. Stella was helpful on occasion but she was also really mean. We knew how to handle mean. It wasn't pleasant, but we knew what to do with mean. But in one of our gatherings, she expressed some intense need for help, so we spun our wheels and found a social worker in town that would help out, and the next time we saw Stella, she denied ever asking for help and got mad at us for setting that up in her name. Again, fair enough. Sometimes even needing help can be a sensitive thing, and while it was frustrating, she was allowed to have a bad day.

But then one day, when Stella arrived, she was especially in her feelings. As the day progressed, she got meaner and angrier than we'd ever seen. And she started threatening other people in the room. Ken stood to his full six-foot-four and said she needed to go find somewhere to cool off. And she did. She left. And the rest of us just sat there trying to figure out how to solve a problem like Stella. Of course, it's not all that great to look at another person as a problem to solve, but we were in a bind. We promised people they could have bad days. And we had all sorts of constructive ways to deal with conflict and discomfort. And we had a growing and treasured reputation as the only place in town where people could come and let their guard down. And now someone who really needed all those things was a part of our community. Stella, probably more than anyone, needed that place. But she didn't know how to be in that place.

Our core leadership, including people from the homeless community, spent hours trying to figure out what to do the next time she showed up. We debated, we read scripture together, we prayed together. We went our separate ways, slept on it, and came back to talk it through some more. And where we landed was that, the next time she came, if she had a bad day, that was fine. But if she threatened anyone again, we'd have to ask her to leave. Not just for the day but not for forever either. We'd ask her to leave for a month. Give us and her a break, and then she could come back. You know, when I say it now, it seems perfectly reasonable. But in the moment, everything was so hot that it felt like a deep betrayal to everything I felt Christianity should stand for. There's room in this big tent for everyone and their bad behavior. God can handle it. But also, we gotta keep our people safe.

Well, next time we met, Stella arrived, and she was big mad, and before she even put her stuff down, she was cussin' and makin' a stir. So far so good, but then she went that little extra step too far and singled out a kind bearded gnome of a man sitting quietly in a corner. And she tried to loom over him with her wiry frame and the threats came anew. Ken and I stood slowly and sort of corralled her out, and there on the sidewalk facing the central bus terminal, with our backs to the church and our eyes locked with one of God's most wounded creatures, there I turned away a hurting soul. And it broke my heart. As she fumed away, Ken put his hand on my shoulder and we walked back inside. Everything about Mercy Church felt different while she was gone. We had all convinced ourselves it was the right thing to do, but it felt awful being right. We sang and we prayed and we read scripture, but there was very little joy that day. There wasn't even relief. There was a real sense of a shift. At Mercy Church, you're allowed to have a bad day...just not too bad. I can't tell you what a change that was.

Today's Gospel is one of those I wish I had a whole month to preach on. For one thing, it's just plain long. But there's also a lot going on, many sermons' worth of one-liners and weird comments and miracles and temple politics and regular ol' politics and disaster and historical perspective and on and on. It's also one of those passages Christians have used for millennia to justify the mistreatment of Jewish people. But I want to zoom in on one thing, and that's what it meant to be a Christian at that time. To be a Christian at the time of this whole kerfuffle meant you were a Jew who said that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah and also the Son of God. Now, to be a messiah at that point was sort of a dime-a-dozen thing. Lots of folks claimed to be the messiah, and the authorities more or less let those claims go. But to say you're the Son of God was a bridge too far. It meant you no longer believed what Jewish people believed. That was impossible.

This might be kinda hard for us to wrap our heads around now because we're so used to hearing the idea that it doesn't sound all that strange. I mean, you can debate whether or not it's rational or factual or historical, but the idea itself isn't out of left field. But for them, being the Son of God was completely wild. But to their credit, they didn't really crack down that much at first. It was just another weird idea that was beyond the pale but also not causing too much trouble. Until it did. As his popularity grew, eventually the Jewish leaders had to sit down and debate and pray and study together to figure out how to solve a problem like Jesus. He wasn't a

physical threat like Stella, but he did have a similar effect on the community. Because of this person, we've got to weigh in, and no matter what we say, something about who we are changes. The main question at the time was "Can you believe in Jesus and remain a Jew?"

It's a sad twist of fate that we can look at our modern lives and recognize the answer very clearly. If you believe in Jesus, you're Christian. That seems pretty straightforward. So why have so many Christians used this as a justification to vilify the Jewish people? You know what? It beats me. That's probably a topic for Bible Study one of these days. But in church, as we make the turn from today on through Easter Sunday and beyond, we have a story to tell. It's our story of Jesus and all the stunning gifts he gives the world. The story matters to us, deeply, but it also matters how we tell it. And I'll give you fair warning, our scriptures don't always tell it in the most evenhanded way. Thinking back to Stella, I wonder how she tells the story of Mercy Church. I'm sure her view of how things went down is very different from mine. Something tells me there's a similar thing going on with her as there is with today's reading. Stories like this, where one party hurts and the other is hurt (and who's who depends on who's telling the story), stories like this are messy. They don't make a ton of space for nuance, and they really don't make space for someone to have a bad day. Stella did come back to Mercy Church after her month was up. She never threatened anyone again, but she wasn't suddenly nice, either. But she came back. And there was a space for her when she did.

I guess I've told you about Stella and me because I'm trying to muddy the waters a little bit. The Gospel seems so cut and dry but there's something going on beneath the surface. We have one side of the story, *our* story, and as a religion have taken very little time to step back and consider how else this whole thing might've looked. With Stella, I don't want you to get caught up in who was right and who was wrong. I just want you to see how messy it can get. Maybe that's a better name for what we did down in that basement: Messy Church. Maybe that's a better name for all of our churches. Living in community is hard, and loving God is hard. And loving God through God's people is the easiest thing in the world, until it's the hardest. But y'all, that's church, Mercy or St. Thomas', and it's always going to be messy.