

College Hill Presbyterian Church  
October 7, 2018  
World Communion Sunday

A SERMON  
by Rev. Sheri L. Curry

**Set up**

It was a “parking-lot moment” – you know  
when you get to the jail and you can’t go in  
because of the spell-binding NPR program on your radio  
a parking-lot moment!

“Take 10% of your time and force yourself to go places that are seemingly weird  
- put yourself someplace to learn,  
to be curious,  
to discover,”  
said Beth Comstock, American business woman and former vice chair of General Electric.  
She was talking about business  
– I heard her talking about faith.

“Put yourself in weird spaces to hear stories  
- to encounter another point of view,” she said.

I heard, “Put yourself in weird spaces  
where you can hear the stories of the people of God.”

Weird places – new perspectives –  
she was describing the past four weeks of my life:

First there was Israel and Istanbul with 15 people representing Christian, Muslim,  
Jew . . . and None;  
covered and uncovered; gay and straight,  
dining in “The \$100,000,000 House” of Aljazeera fame

Then there was Tulsa OK and the FREEHER conference  
at the Marriott Hotel Southern Hills with about 300 passionate women –  
90% women of color – 2/3 formerly incarcerated.

Weird places – even my own car – as I listened to the drama  
of the United States Supreme Court hearings  
which have culminated during October – Domestic Violence Awareness month.

Be curious . . . listen . . . new viewpoints.  
It was a “parking-lot moment.”

All this at a time that your worship committee asked me to preach  
– and the lectionary said “Job”  
. . . and because there was Israel  
and 4 friends covered and uncovered  
. . . there was – now - Ayyub.

Listen – to readings from the Quran – Sahih International version

[4:163]

Indeed, We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad],  
as We revealed to Noah and the prophets after him;  
And we *revealed* to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob,  
the Descendants  
- Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon,  
and to David We gave the book [of Psalms].

[6:84] [38:41-44]

And remember Our servant Job,  
when he called to his Lord, "Indeed,  
Satan has touched me with hardship and torment."

[So he was told], "Strike [the ground] with your foot;  
this is a [spring for] a cool bath and drink."

And We granted him his family  
and a like [number] with them  
as mercy from Us  
and a reminder for those of understanding.

[We said], "And take in your hand a bunch [of grass]  
and strike with **it**  
and do not break your **oath**."

Indeed, We found him patient,  
an excellent servant.

Indeed, he was one repeatedly turning back [to Allah] – to God.

The stories of God – for the people of God.

Prayer:

We love the house in which you dwell, O God  
- the place where your glory abides.  
Keep your steadfast love before our eyes  
as we walk in faithfulness to you. Amen.

## Stories of faith for the people of God

Sermon alert!

You will hear little today about God although the stories will be about the people of God.

And we will not be exegeting The Book of Job today!

Today, Job is simply the text that starts us thinking about “weird spaces” in which to learn,  
space in which to be curious, and to ponder where God’s people  
might lead us.

Earlier, did you notice that Mike read this morning’s lectionary text  
from the Hebrew text called *The Tanakh*?

With that reading, we pushed ourselves a bit into a new space.

A new space, yes - yet, if you were following along in your pew Bibles,  
there wasn’t much difference between what you heard from the lectern  
and what you saw in the pew Bible.

That’s one lesson about “weird places”:

Some places are not as uncomfortable as we feared they might be.

During these few minutes that we’re in Job, there are a couple of things worth noting.

Did you know that there are words in Job that show up nowhere else in the Hebrew texts?  
Weird.

And did you know that some scholars believe The Book of Job was originally written in Aramaic  
. . . or, . . . perhaps, Arabic?

I will hasten to add that other scholars have evidence to say **Hebrew**  
was the original language of The Book of Job.<sup>1</sup>

- another lesson about risking to step into “weird places”: Sometimes there’s tension.

Before we move on from Job, might I suggest that the next time your book club  
wants to wrestle with literary genius and the weighty topics of  
human suffering,  
faith,

and God’s steadfast love

- choose the *Book of Job*. It’s an incredible read.

As for our second reading . . . were you familiar with the story of Islam’s Job – Ayyub -  
before today?

If not, you may feel as if you’ve slipped into a “weird space.”

We are in Christian Worship, listening to the story of Ayyub from Islam.

Why?

Because our quest during this 10% of the day is to put ourselves in places to learn,  
to be curious,  
to discover.”

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<sup>1</sup> Harper Collins Bible Commentary, Edwin M. Good, “Language,” 369.

So, the Quranic story goes like this:

Job has credibility - he's named among the prophets.

Job or Ayyub is in extreme distress.  
Ayyub prays. God listens.

Then God gives Ayyub a plan-of-action: Do this and you'll get this.

With God-given knowledge, Ayyub now digs up a water-fountain at the specified location and benefits by its healing power.

The lessons of Ayyub are clear:

1. God's steadfast love is the foundational and forever!
2. God will guide us in this earthly sojourn.
3. We have a choice as to whether or not we will put our trust in God and take the appropriate action.<sup>2</sup>

Job and Ayyub – the same character . . . two names.

Two perspectives:

One from the Hebrew texts  
– the other from the Quran.

Both - beautifully told.

Both - equally engaging.

Both - inspiring the faith of the people for which the stories were written.

How *strange* to encounter them together in Christian worship.

Hebrew and Muslim.

In our search for weird places in which to listen to the stories of the people of God,  
we now enter Israel's West Bank

- a large area west of the Jordan River contested by Jews and Arabs  
and under military rule.

### **[The Stories of ISRAEL's West Bank]**

Two Sundays ago, you heard stories from Pastor Todd about his trip to Israel.

Bob and I were two of the 15 people on that trip with Pastor Todd.

My guess is that your take-away from Todd's Sunday morning jet-lagged sermon was  
"It's complicate." And it is!

There we were - 15 people - "called" to the Holy Lands

- or maybe, called to the Land of the Holy:

The land of Jews, Christians, Muslims, and even secular

- to listen to two interpretations of one story.

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<sup>2</sup> Gohar Mukhtar's weblog.

Dual Narrative Travel – they call it.  
Listening to stories  
– travel designed to challenge participants to think on multiple levels.

Our need was not for clarity.  
Our goals was to listen to increase our knowledge of conflicts  
and to validate peoples lived experiences.

Our Guides . . .  
Eldad: Secular, Israeli, Jew  
and Adam: Jordanian, Arab, Palestinian, and card carrying Israeli citizen

They told us that in any story  
there are Facts  
there are Eliminated facts  
there are things we're not sure about  
and that putting together multiple stories gets us closer to what really happened.

Good information!

Going to Jerusalem was a weird stepping off place for all of us.  
Even our guides as it turned out.

Early in the tour, we met with Rabbi Daniel Roth.

Rabbi Roth is Director of The Pardes Center for Judaism and Conflict Resolution  
and he is leading an effort to resurrect an ancient holiday on the Jewish calendar,  
a day dedicated to resolving conflicts constructively  
and to *actively* pursuing peace.

A calendar day! An idea worthy of consideration, yes?

Rabbi Roth is originally from Syracuse, NY.  
He was reared in a conservative Religious Zionist family.

In my efforts at note-taking with Rabbi Roth, I lost track of the players in the Israeli story  
of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

- Religious Zionists
- Secular Zionists
- The Knesset
- Ultra-Orthodox Jews
- Messianic Zionists
- Anti-Zionists

Indeed, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is “complicated” with no clear road to peace.

Finally, someone asked the question on all our lips:  
“If there was one thing you could do to address the conflict, what would you do?”

Rabbi Roth's response was immediate: “I'd make Arabic mandatory in every school  
beginning in grade 1.”

The next day we visited such a school: Hand in Hand  
- a nonprofit bilingual school for Arab and Jewish youth in Israel  
where elementary school classes are taught by co-teachers, one Jewish and one Arab,  
in which all students learn both Hebrew as well as Arabic.

Arab Christians, Muslims, Armenian Christians, Druze,  
Mizrahi, Ashkenazi and Ethiopian Jews,  
and a growing number of observant Jewish families as well  
– all were welcome. All - seeking a new direction.

A post on the Hand in Hand facebook page says,  
“If every school in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza was a Hand in Hand school,  
there would be no conflict. I have only love and admiration for you all.”

The spokesperson for Hand in Hand Schools, Noa, told us that she, like Rabbi Roth,  
had grown up in a conservative Religious Zionist family.

Until she went to college – where she majored in music -  
she had no contact nor exposure to Palestinian youth.  
Then, she found herself sharing a music stand with a Palestinian.  
Her fear and mistrust transformed into friendship.

As Noa shared her story, and as we watched Israeli, Arab, Palestinian, Christian,  
Muslim and Jewish children  
giggling in the courtyard and sharing tables in the classroom,  
our 6-foot guide fought back tears.

Eldad was our guide into this dual narrative,  
yet he did not know of this space called Hand in Hand.  
He did not know that his dream of peace could be glimpsed in his beloved Israel.  
Now - he knew.

## **[FREEHER]**

It’s an odd phenomenon to think you thoroughly know your craft and your environment  
only to be transported into a space you didn’t even know existed.

Upon returning to Tulsa, I found myself at the national FREEHER conference  
where about 300 women gathered to proclaim, “FREE HER!”

It didn’t take long to realize that this space was different and that the term “dual narrative”  
had followed me back to Tulsa.

My white, privileged, American culture encountered the mass incarceration of  
of people of color

of people with mental illness and  
of people seeking safety in this country

And although my white American culture proclaims that the US abolished slavery in 1864  
the women of FREEHER know first-hand that slavery was never abolished  
and exists today – sometimes at \$.24 an hour in the prison complex  
making “Made in America” products.

Dual narratives.

So, I listened.

The demands were clear:

- no bonds
- no debilitating fines and fees
- no solitary confinement for anyone
  - “Unlock the box” rang the slogan
- no more sending re-entry people back to programs
  - in the same neighborhoods that brought them to prison
- voting rights for all people released from prison
  - regardless of “probation and parole” status
- no more slavery
- no incarceration for women and girls

FREEHER – “no incarceration for all women and girls” – no jails.  
That one made me curious.

No incarceration? If not incarceration, then what?

I know bad things happen.

I had heard the story from a woman who said that her son was arrested for murder on Friday  
- her daughter was murdered on Saturday.

Bad things happen. What about consequences and justice?  
What about public safety?

So, as sat around the table breaking bread,  
I asked the woman next to me what she thought about  
“no incarceration.”

She was 52 years old.

Her name is Teresa and she said, “Share my story.”

I was always the one telling people, “Don’t do drugs.”

Then my friend was struggling with cancer and the drugs she had to take for the cancer  
were making her sicker than the disease.

Crack eased the pain and complications.

When she asked me if I could get some crack for her,  
I said, “I’ll do anything for you, baby.”

And since she was my friend, and since I lost track of my boundaries,  
I told her I’d smoke with her.

It was the one thing I thought I could do to be with her in her pain.

She told me not to do it. She begged me not to do it.

Yet, I loved her, and she was going through hard times.

I believed that smoking with her wouldn’t hurt – I was 42 years old, and I was strong.

I was wrong.

Before long I was forging checks to support my habit.

Around that time, we moved from my family in New York City to South Carolina.

And my husband was cheating on me.

Someone called my mama in New York and told her I was doing drugs.

That call was made at 8:00 o'clock in the morning.  
By 5:00 p.m., my mamma was in my living room  
in South Carolina saying to someone, "You're a liar."  
My daughter would never do drugs. She's the one always telling others not to do drugs."

"I went to prison.  
Yes, there were drugs in prison.  
Drugs are easy to get.

So why did I not go looking for the drugs?

It was when I realized that I couldn't hold my husband;  
I couldn't hold my son;  
And I couldn't wipe my mama's tears as she sat there on the other side  
of the visiting glass from me."

When asked again about "no jails," Teresa said, "Maybe all we need is time for reflection  
– and a safe place to do it."

The final session of the conference was last Sunday about this time.  
We were asked to make a pledge.

"My number one purpose in life is to create space for black people," said the speaker.  
"So, repeat after me:  
I commit myself to healing  
I commit myself to black people  
I commit myself to honor the power I was born with."

### **I commit myself to healing –**

And now I can't help but think of the Supreme Court hearings  
of the past week and the statements of Judge Kavanaugh and Dr. Ford.  
Our entire culture stepped into weird spaces this past week.

We now know that Dr. Ford's story did not change the outcome  
of an appointment to the Supreme Court for Judge Kavanaugh.

Yet, we listened. The nation listened.

And we now have no excuse for not knowing that the testimony made by Dr. Ford  
happens every day.

And because Dr. Ford dared to speak and because she risked going into that new space,  
we will never be the same again.  
We are more likely to listen.  
And that's a good thing!

Israel, FREEHER Tulsa, the Supreme Court hearings.

Take 10% of your time  
and force yourself to go places that are seemingly weird  
- put yourself someplace to learn,  
to be curious,  
to discover.”

Those weird spaces are the places we will find God’s people – all God’s people.

## **Ending**

In thinking about these past 30 days, the weirdest space we could dare to go is at this Table.

Image - all around the world from all kinds of denominations  
God’s people will come to a Table on this one day  
to partake in the sacrament  
to remember other Christians around the world.  
The practice began at Shadyside Presbyterian Church  
in Pittsburgh, PA in 1933.

At this ancient Table, all are welcome.  
From north and south, from east and west, they will gather  
God’s people  
called to the Table where heaven meets earth,  
where simple grace nourishes

There’s really no other place on earth  
quite like this “dream” of The Table of Plenty.

Can this be a space

where we dare to truly meet one another,  
where we break bread together,  
where we share a cup,

where we listen to the stories of the people of God  
no violence, no conflicts, no prior allegiances that force us apart,  
all races, all colors, all genders, all abilities and disabilities  
– praying, talking with one another, feasting, dancing -  
the gathering of saints and sinners  
– believing in the covenant that all people – all - are welcome.

It’s a weird dream.

May *we* make it so!