

When a Ramp is Not What You Wanted

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Philippians 1:12-14 I want you to know, my brothers [and sisters], that the things that have happened to me have really helped the progress of the gospel. (Good News Translation)
- Luke 22:39-46 ⁴¹ Then he went off from them about the distance of a stone's throw and knelt down and prayed. ⁴² "Father," he said, "if you will, take this cup of suffering away from me. Not my will, however, but your will be done." (Good News Translation)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Reluctance also presents an invitation to surrender.

What do Joseph, Jonah, Jesus and Jon have in common, besides their initial?

The "Joseph" I refer to is the favorite son of the biblical Jacob and great-grandson of Abraham of Old Testament fame. Nowadays more people are familiar with Joseph through the Andrew Lloyd Webber Broadway musical "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" and may be surprised to learn that Lloyd Webber got the story from the Bible.

In a nutshell, Joseph's jealous older brothers sell him into slavery. Joseph finds himself a servant to the Egyptian pharaoh. Joseph's abilities in interpreting dreams enable him to rise to prominence in Pharaoh's court. Eventually, Joseph is able to help his brothers even though they had done him harm so many years earlier. One of my favorite Bible verses is when Joseph forgives his brothers, saying to them, "You plotted evil against me, but God turned it into good, in order to preserve the lives of many people who are alive today because of what happened."¹ Certainly Joseph never wanted to be sold into slavery, but God redeemed that awful situation—God made something good out of something bad.

What about Jonah? You know Jonah because of "the whale." For that matter, you probably know that the biblical book about Jonah does not actually say that he was swallowed by a whale but rather by a "big fish." That happened when God asked Jonah to do something Jonah didn't want to do and Jonah tried to get out of it by leaving town on a boat. According to the story, God told the fish to swallow Jonah to give him a "time out" to reconsider God's request, and a few days later, also at God's command, the fish spit Jonah out onto a beach. Eventually Jonah reluctantly walked to the big city of Nineveh and told them to shape up, just as God had commanded. And they did. Which angered Jonah. He didn't think they deserved God's forgiveness. Jonah went off and moped about how he thought God was too merciful to people who didn't deserve it.

So that's Joseph and Jonah. About Jesus... it's usually the last days of wintertime when we hear the Bible story about Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. During that time of prayer Jesus could see that life's walls were closing in on him; he could see that betrayal and arrest, torture and execution were very real possibilities for him. That's why Jesus prayed these words: "Father, if you will, take this cup of suffering away from me. Not my will, however, but your will be done."² Did Jesus want to die? No, I certainly don't think so. Even Jesus didn't want to suffer. But he was able to surrender his will to the greater will of the Divine Parent of us all.

¹ Genesis 50:20 Good News Translation

² Luke 22:42 Good News Translation

Joseph, Jonah, Jesus... and yes, now Jon. Me. Last week you heard from our church's kids who had just returned from the week-long mission trip. We had attended a work camp in Middletown, Ohio near Cincinnati. A work camp means that the kids put in about six hours per day doing construction tasks like replacing handrails, installing drywall, building porches, replacing steps. When the kids and I each registered for the camp, the organizers have a survey that asks us, on a scale of 1 to 5, to rate our ability to do painting and carpentry tasks. Are you a master painter or do you just know not to drink paint for lunch? Are you an experienced carpenter, or can you at least drive a nail with a hammer? I can do painting; I don't love it, but I can do it; I gave myself a "4" on that scale. I'm quite conservative in evaluating my carpentry skills. I can use power tools, but I think I ranked myself a "2" on the scale that went up to "5."

On these work camps they give you a list of tools and supplies to bring, but you don't learn what kind of project you're doing until you're there at work camp in the opening night's meeting. I just remember thinking to myself over and over, "Just don't ask me to build a wheelchair ramp." I'd helped with one many years ago when former member Reed Roig was another of the adult advisors, and *his* experience got us through that job. But here I was saying, "Don't ask me to build a wheelchair ramp. Don't ask me to build a wheelchair ramp." It's the last thing in the world I wanted to do.

After the work camp's opening worship they broke us into 69 different work crews and handed out the assignment packets. One of the youth in Crew #19 that I was responsible for opened the packet and read aloud: "Crew #19: you will be building a wheelchair ramp." "Come on, God! You *can't* be serious!"

We were to build a wheelchair ramp for Sharon's mobile home. Each worksite had an adult with construction experience as a site consultant, but since they oversaw about eight sites, our site consultant would stop by only once or twice a day. He'd talk through the process, but when it came time to execute the plan, it was up to us. Our crew of me and five kids had one boy whose father did some carpentry so he had some skill, maybe comparable to mine (so that's not saying much).

We had tools, but not everything that would have been helpful. We did our best to line things up, to make level the things that were supposed to be and to build the slope of the ramp at the proper angle. The work camp people provided each crew with a helpful booklet with information about the most common jobs crews faced, like building steps or hanging drywall or painting a house or building a wheelchair ramp. But because of the size and angle of the lot and driveway for Sharon's mobile home, we couldn't build a straight ramp, nor could we build one with a switchback. Our site consultant concluded that we would need to build a custom-made, designed-in-our-heads, boomerang-shaped ramp.

The boys and girls took turns using the manual post-hole diggers to dig thirteen holes two feet deep into tough muddy clay soil. Then we learned that the trailer park forbid putting concrete into the ground, since the trailer owners only rent the land. So we had to devise a way of securing the ramp's supporting posts by repacking the clay in around the posts and tamping it to make it solid while keeping the posts in line. Three of our crew had to learn how to use a power drill to drive screws. (One of the benefit of work camps is that you do learn new skills.) By work camp rules, only one of the kids on our crew was old enough to use the power saw. Oh, and the lumber that had been delivered for our project wasn't the right lumber for a wheelchair ramp; it was more like for a large party deck. So we had to keep busy while we waited to unload the new lumber and load up the wrong lumber and the other unnecessary supplies that had been delivered to our site.

So take our limited expertise, insufficient tools, wrong lumber delivery, and as a bonus add the biting flies and the blistering sun, sweltering heat and drowning humidity, and you can

see that there were a lot of factors that had told me that building a wheelchair ramp was the last thing I wanted to do. However, I can't wait to do it again.

Now, I can't be alone in facing prospects I don't want to deal with. Joseph, Jonah, even Jesus had to. I imagine that you do too. At some points in life – may a lot! – we need to change our point of view in order to face up to the challenge before us.

God asks us to surrender. Surrender our ego. Our strong-willed certainty. Our sense of self-importance. Our expectation of competence. God asks us to surrender ourselves to the power of God so God's power can be displayed through what we do.

I came across a poem this week that describes the benefit of learning to see life's challenges from a different point of view. We've all heard the familiar saying, "When life give you lemons, make lemonade." This poem uses the metaphor of the game of golf to suggest ways of surrendering to the challenge in front of us. I know that many people don't golf, but this poem doesn't use a lot of insider language so I think it speaks profound truth in a simple way about acceptance and surrender:

*Lord, as I walk down the fairways of life,
help me to realize that my greatest opportunities to learn are actually when I am in
the rough, where I discover things I never knew were there,
and when I'm in the deepest sand, where I learn that there is a time to walk softly and
clean-up after myself,
and when I'm playing scramble, where I learn that I have friends to make up for what
I lack,
and when I find the water, where I learn that some things are better left alone.
And when the ball rolls into the hole for that wonderful par, help me to realize that all good
things come from you.³*

Do you have some challenge in your life that you need to surrender to so you can accept the reality of the situation and move through it? Are you facing a "build-a-wheelchair-ramp" challenge that seems so overwhelming that it stops you in your tracks?

- It might be something as mundane as resolving to tackle that household project you've put off for so long that you can't remember it *not* being on your to-do list.
- Maybe there are some arrangements that you've been meaning to get to, like having a lawyer draw up a will, or signing health care power-of-attorney forms or living wills – all things you know would be good, but because they force you to consider your mortality you've never gotten around to them.
- Maybe it's finally setting aside the time and registering to take that certification course that would be so helpful to you.
- Maybe you need to get around to having that long-postponed conversation that needs to happen.
- Maybe it's deciding to accept Jesus not only as an intellectual inspiration and a model citizen, but also to accept him as the master and guide for your life.

What you've been reluctant to do might be a matter of letting go of some *thing* that you've been clinging to for way too long but it's keeping you from moving on. So maybe you are or someday will be facing a "ramp you don't want to build." What can we learn from the examples of Joseph and Jonah and even Jesus? Recognize that your reluctance also presents you with an invitation to surrender, to "let go and let God."

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³ "Golfer's Prayer" by Jack Hiatt at <http://stmarksgolfoutings.tripod.com/id20.html>, accessed 7/4/2018