

SUMMER PICNIC
Rev. Edee Fenimore
August 18, 2013
UCC at The Villages
Texts: I Kings 2:1-4 and Mark 7:1-8

Maybe this sermon came about because I recently saw *Copperhead*, a low key but powerful movie set in northern New York state during the Civil War. Differences of opinion about the war divide not only the country but the town and neighborhoods and even families. The result of these divisions is a tragedy that such us/them thinking often engenders.

But maybe I was influenced by a television documentary that was repeated recently. It was about a group of teenagers from Pennsylvania who spent 10 days in Georgia rebuilding a church that had been burned. They confessed that it was easy for them as young white teens to work, eat and talk with African American members of that congregation but as they were returning home they admitted that they had no relationship with any of their African American classmates. Or perhaps the amount of preaching I have done this past year confirms for me how many passages of scripture deal with our unity in Christ, our membership in God's family that makes all people our brothers and sisters. Maybe a visit from a high school friend was the impetus- remembering how foolishly separated we were in those days. Those rigid divisions at least disappeared during our last reunion- maybe the gray hair and wrinkles formed a common bond.

I'm sure I was influenced by the fact that a staple of the talk show circuit is the tensions between groups of people. On any given day you can see and hear whites screaming at blacks, Hispanics screaming at whites, Asian Americans, Jewish Americans, Italian Americans, gays, straights, Democrats, Republicans, conservatives, liberals- everybody dividing the world into arbitrary categories and complaining about all the other categories. Us/them mentality seems rampant. But perhaps I was simply reacting to the scripture lessons from this morning. The passage from I Kings says, "Walk in God's ways, keep God's statutes and commandments. Follow God's ordinances and testimonies." The passage from Mark tells of Jesus quoting Isaiah saying, "This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine.

So for some or all or non of these reasons, I want to share with you a story- a story not of something that happened, but something that happens, a story about choosing to live by rules of the heart rather than the rules of a culture. For the next ten minutes or so, please use your imaginations and come with me to Hingham, Massachusetts. It is the end of summer 1955 and we have all finished our junior year in high school. One of our crowd, Franny, has had a foreign exchange student living at her house this year. Let me say a word about our crowd. We are the good kids. In the 1950s we were called straight arrows or preppies, even though we were in public high school. Our type crowd has had different labels over the years in different parts of the country but the important thing then and now is that our crowd is different from the others- the hoods, the greasers, the heads, the bad kids. We don't dress the way they do. We don't go to the same parties. Most of our classes are different. We hang out at different places and most importantly never, never does any of us date a hood.

Anyhow, Asha, the girl from India who had been staying with Franny had made quite an impression on all of us. Right from the day that she arrived we were drawn to her. She was wearing a beautiful green and gold sari. And Asha herself was just gorgeous, with smooth brown skin, jet black hair and beautiful wide brown eyes. And she always seemed to be happy; laughing or smiling and really kind and concerned about each person that she met. She seemed to like everything about that small New England town.. She even liked the hot dogs, baked beans and brown bread that were the Saturday night staple in most New England homes. Her favorite flavor of Howard Johnson's ice cream was chocolate chip. And after school she would hurry with all of us to the soda fountain at Carney's drug store and she would order a root beer float or a frappe. In New England in those days that was what was called a milkshake in most parts of the country.

Anyhow it was on our way to Carney's one afternoon that we got our first hint of trouble. Right next to Carney's was Pete's gas station where the hoods, the bad kids, usually hung out. They would get cokes from the coke machine. It was the old fashioned chest kind of coke machine. Some of you may remember the kind. You had to slide your bottle of coke through a series of passageways and get it into a kind of vertical gateway and then lift it out. The hoods would lean on that old coke chest and talk about motorcycle parts and how to tune up a car's engine.

Well, picture yourself with us. We are walking to Carney's and suddenly Asha walks right over to the hoods that are gathered at the gas station. She begins talking with Jake, one of the hoods that didn't drop out of school at the age of sixteen. She's laughing and smiling with him just the way she does with us. We all are wondering what on earth she could be talking about with him. Several of the crowd say that someone has to talk to her and I decide that I will be the one. As Asha comes into Carney's and gets her chocolate frappe, I maneuver a seat on the stool next to her. "Asha, I say to her, you know that if one of those hoods calls to you, you can just walk on by. Some of them are really crude like that. Did Jake make some kind of crude remark?" Asha's description of how nice Jake is makes it clear that she doesn't understand how things work in our crowd. Living with Franny and her family means that she is one of us and doesn't have to have anything to do with them- the hoods. It's not that we dislike them. It's sort of a birds-of-a-feather thing. We all get good grades and are planning to go on to college. Most of them are already working in gasoline stations or at construction jobs.

Things didn't get any better after that first incident. In fact from our perspective they seem to get worse. We try talking to Asha again, but she seems to ignore our wisdom. Between classes, she talks to Jake and some of his friends. Don't get me wrong; she doesn't ignore us. She just treats them the same way that she treats us. Why one time she invites some of them to sit at our lunch table. When we said that all the places were saved, Asha actually went and sat at their table. It is obvious to us that another talk is in order.

It is during a pajama party at Franny's that we begin to talk about associating with certain people. As we begin to lay out things that seem really important to us, Asha asks where all these rules of friendship are written down. We all begin to laugh and explain that this is not written down anywhere. We all just know how things are.

By the time summer arrives we think that our problems are over. You see, the hoods all go to Nantasket Beach to swim and hang out at the amusement park there. We all go to the Yacht Club to swim and sail. We are all looking forward to the end of summer picnic. Each year, sometime during the last week in August, a crowd of us would sail or motor out to Ragged Island for a cookout. As we were planning who would bring what, Asha announced that she had invited Jake to come along. We were appalled but gave up on trying to convince her that that sort of thing just wasn't done. Asha was going home soon and of course we would never socialize with Jake or any of his crowd again.

So now we are all caught up on the things that preceded the evening of the picnic. We are gathering at the Yacht Club, loading the sailboats with hot dogs, hamburgers, rolls and charcoal. I guess it is not noticeable at first that we are all ignoring Jake. If Asha notices, she is not saying anything. She is still laughing, smiling, talking with each person that passes by. We get to the island around 6:30 and of course, immediately you boys try to toss some of us in the water. We squeal and some of us race into the water before you can throw us in. Can't Asha see that Jake just doesn't fit in? All of the rest of you guys have nice plaid swim trunks under your Bermuda shorts but Jake has a sleazy brief swimsuit under jeans. Asha and Jake have arrived later than the rest of us because nobody asked them if they wanted a ride in a sailboat or motorboat so they had to row out to the island. Maybe they do notice our coolness because they are swimming off to the side away from the rest of us. We know that they are close to the place where there is always a riptide but we do not say anything.

Then it happens. Someone notices that Jake has gotten caught in an eddy and is struggling. Asha calls to us but we are fairly far away and so she begins to reach out to Jake. We can see what is happening but we cannot get there fast enough to prevent it. Asha pulls Jake in to where he can get a footing but in doing so she is pulled into the strong riptide and swept away.

Asha's body is recovered the next day. It is flown over to India for a service for her family and friends. We are left with the arbitrary rules that separated us and the memory of a beautiful young girl with a smile that welcomed all.

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