

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
August 7, 2011
Romans 10:5-15

“Reflections of Being the Worst”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

I am not sure what I was thinking.
But in my defense I will say that the brochure made the bike tour sound
reasonable, do-able, and even fun!

Called the “Bon Ton Roulet,” the bike trip was a week of cycling through the
Finger Lakes region of upstate New York. The tour included three meals a day, a
place to camp each night, bike tech support, and detailed maps of the daily route.
I should have been wary when I read that the Bon Ton Roulet attracts 650 cyclists
each year.

Anyway, in mid-July, I packed my bike, my tent, and my gear and headed for the
Finger Lakes. Unloading my car at the start of the tour on day #1, hour #1, I knew
I was out of my league, over my head. My bike was old and heavy, with fat tires, a
cushioned seat, and upright handlebars. The other 600 bikers had fancy new bikes
with skinny tires, skinny seats and drop handlebars. I looked around at the
crowd—lots of spandex, small tapered helmets, wrap-around sunglasses, light
weight saddlebags.

My bike was wrong, my gear was wrong, my clothes were wrong.
They were cool, I was the misfit.

When we started biking on day #1, I tried to get near the front of the pack.
Within 30 maybe 45 minutes, 600 people had passed me.
They were fast, I was slow.

What happened on day #1 was repeated daily for the next six days. I was one of
the slowest bikers. People passed me all day long—after every rest break, after
every stop to take photographs, after they changed a flat tire, people passed me
constantly.

Back near the rear of the pack, I biked the fifty-mile daily route with the others who were maybe a little too chubby for this ride, the men and women who maybe did not train quite enough for this ride, the older men and women who breathed hard and went slowly.

For one entire week, I pedaled on the bike trip as one of the undeniable worst...in the back of the pack with the decidedly uncool, all-together-too-slow crowd.

Each evening, when I straggled into camp, I wolfed down my supper, put up my tent, climbed into my sleeping bag and read. The book I was totally absorbed in was NAKED SPIRITUALITY by Brian McLaren. It saved my life.

In NAKED SPIRITUALITY, McLaren identifies twelve words that he says one can build a prayer practice around. Each word has a chapter and each chapter gives a mindfulness and prayer practice that focuses on just that one word.

One of the words McLaren offers is “HERE” and the prayer he suggests is quite simple. It goes: **“Here I am. Here you are. Here we are together.”**

I really took to this prayer—I latched on to it like a dog with a bone. Each morning I would climb on my bike, pedal slowly out of camp and say to God: “Here I am. Here you are. Here we are together.”

Each day as I huffed and puffed up the way-too-steep hills in the company of the other slow, sweating, panting misfits, I would look around and say: “Here I am. Here you are. Here we are together.” (Often I said it out loud!)

Now, let’s pause and reflect on our Scripture reading for today. Notice what Paul tells the early Christians in the community in Rome...in our reading for today from the Book of Romans, Paul tells the early Church that they have been told that the law, the Torah, is THE path to righteousness. But Paul says that what we believe in our hearts and what we do with our lives is another and an equally significant path to righteousness. He tells those early Christians, “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.”

The word of God is inside you, near you, in your very heart, Paul is telling them. YES look to the law, yes look to what is written out there, but also trust that God is near, and that the word of God is near...on your very lips, in your own heart. Paul is saying follow not just the letter of the law, but the guidance of the Spirit inside you.

On my bike trip, as I pedaled along as one of the visibly and undeniably worst bikers, I lived Paul's message...the word of God was near. And so God was near. The word was on my lips and in my heart. The simple words that brought God near to me was the mantra I said over and over again: "Here I am. Here you are. Here we are together."

I felt that God was near...helping me to continue, helping me not to quit, helping me to make a learning experience out of a near-disaster. I almost felt like God and I were cycling together...me, and God, AND all the misfits at the back of the pack.

As I said my "Here" prayer over and over each day, I realized that if Jesus went on the Bon Ton Roulet through the Finger Lakes he would probably CHOOSE the back of the pack—all of us misfits would be his people. Jesus would make a point of cycling with the uncool crowd sweating and panting way behind the spandex superstars. Jesus would join those of us who were the worst—he would choose us, we would be his crowd. He would be right there with us.

I realized as I biked each day many hours longer than the fast people who had already put up their tents AND showered when I rolled into camp...I realized that so many of us have had the experience of being the worst.

We were the kids picked last for teams on the playground—we stood there growing crimson in the face with pleading eyes hoping the captain would pick slow, heavy us for some unknown reason.

We were the ones in math class who could not quite get it and needed extra help and tutoring.

We were the kids with ADD who could not focus, could not concentrate and chose to be the class clown instead.

We were the awkward ones at the school dance shifting from foot to foot, hugging the gymnasium walls wishing we could be out on the gym floor dancing too.

We were the ones hoping to go to the prom but not quite sure we would get a date.

We were the adults made to feel unwelcome in church because we brought our partner to worship.

We have all had the experience of feeling like we were the worst...the slowest or the dumbest or the least popular.

We were the ones who could not sing, or dance, or play kick ball, or fit in.

We have all been the misfits.

And I realized that being the worst has its rewards. You have a lot of time to talk to and lean on God.

You get to say, “Here I am. Here you are. Here we are together” and know that God is close and Jesus would choose you and your misfit crowd above all others.

We know that during his ministry Jesus always chose the misfits and those who were the worst as his people...women who were unclean, children who were non-people, tax collectors who were despised, lepers who were untouchable, sick people who were possessed, poor people who were powerless. Jesus always found the misfits, the worst ones in the crowd, and basically he said to them, “Here I am. Here you are. Here we are together.”

When we remember, as Paul said, “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” we can draw close to God and not shut down, withdraw, hide, give up or retreat when we feel that we are the worst. We can turn to God and recognize that God is right there with us and we just need to say the word—the word that is on our lips and in our hearts—and a sense of God’s presence will surround us.

Church at its best is a place where we come together, support one another, listen for the word of God together, take hands and say:
“Here I am. Here you are. Here we are together.”

Each one of us has had the experience of being the worst but each one of us also has gifts, strengths, talents and beauty that far outweigh our supposed deficits. In a faithful, healthy, loving Church community, we see past each other’s weaknesses, lift up and celebrate each other’s strengths, and draw closer to God individually and collectively in the process.

Part of why this Church is a vibrant, happy and growing place is that we lift up each other’s strengths not wounds.

Part of why this Church is a place of welcome, acceptance and joy is that we listen to the laws and guidelines in the Bible AND we bring God close to us through God’s word in simple prayers.

Part of why this Church is a community that is remarkably generous, caring and present to each other is that we embrace the superstars at the front of the pack AND those in the back of the pack huffing, puffing and chugging along.

During July when our Church was closed and I was on vacation, I thought about you all so much. I wondered how you were doing, I worried about you, I wanted to call each person individually and “How are you? What’s up?”

I missed you.

When I returned home I had lunch with a clergy friend in downtown Northampton. She asked me how my month off was and I told her that in many ways it was great but that I also actively missed my people.

“You did?” she said.

“Yes,” I said. “I love them.”

My lunch date was quiet.

She just looked at me.

I am grateful to be with you all again.

I am grateful for the month off, the rest and relaxation AND the lessons embedded in a too-hard bike trip. I am grateful for it all.

But today, I am so happy to be reunited with you in our beautiful, peaceful, light-filled, grace-filled, God-filled Sanctuary. I can truly say, I am happy to see you. I do love you all.

Today, the words on my lips and in my heart are simple...

“Here I am. Here you are. Here we are together.”

Amen.