

"Why Pay Attention to the Bible? Because of a rooster's crow"

Sermon Preached at Foundry United Methodist Church

by Rev. Dean Snyder

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II Samuel 12:1-7a

Luke 22:54-62

I have been at Foundry Church now for four and a half months, and I keep discovering the most outrageous things that I have seen nowhere else in some thirty some years of ministry. This week I was walking through the building, and I went into a room downstairs that I had never really stopped in before, and I discovered these director chairs - there were about fifteen of them in there. They are director chairs that someone had written on and drawn on and painted on!

So I decided I needed to find out about about them, and what I discovered was that in our Junior High Youth Sunday School Class and Youth Group, when children graduate from Elementary Sunday School to Junior High, each of them gets their own chair. They get to decorate them any way they want. Then, for the years they are in the Junior High Group, this becomes their chair. When they graduate, they take the canvas with them and our Junior High Youth Leaders get a new set of canvas for the directors chairs and a new child coming into the Sunday School Class gets it and decorates it and that becomes their chair t for their years in Junior High.

I thought how symbolic this is of Foundry Church - that we really are a church that is committed to ministry with children and youth, and our children and youth get to own a part of this church.

This one is Rich Denbow's chair - I figured that out because everyone has the name of the person on the back of the chair and it said "Rich" and UF#1 for the University of Florida Number One, so I immediately knew this chair was Rich Denbow's, one of our youth leaders.

Then, I came across this other chair. It's supposed to have a name on the back here, and this one, where the name is supposed to be says, "2cute4u!" So I want to find out whose that is. I was thinking it might be Ned Bachman, our youth teacher, but I'm not sure.

You know, our ministry with children and youth happens because people are willing to commit their time and talent. Ned Bachman, Rich Denbow and Liz Martin give an enormous amount of themselves as volunteers to our Junior High Youth. So do our Senior High volunteers. All of the ministries here at Foundry Church happen because you give your talent and your time and your resources. So I want to express my appreciation to you. Nothing makes me prouder (because this is not true in every downtown church in America) nothing makes me prouder than Foundry's commitment to ministry with children and youth and

young adults, so I want to thank you for your faithfulness in the giving of your time and talent and resources for God's service.

Let us pray:

Open our hearts, Lord, that we might receive Jesus, shape our minds and our wills so that we might serve Jesus during this hour and during the week ahead. It is in his name that we pray. Amen

It begins in the very beginning of the Bible. God has given Adam every tree in the garden but one, so that is the one tree in the garden that Adam needs to eat the fruit of. The next time that God comes to visit, Adam tries to hide. He is ashamed. But when God finds him, God knows something is wrong and says, have you eaten the fruit of the one tree I asked you not to eat? Immediately, Adam comes up with excuses - Eve made me do it! But, his excuses don't hide - even though he has tried to put on clothes - his nakedness before God, and Adam trembles in the garden.

Then, in a fit of jealousy and envy, Cain attacks and kills his brother Abel. God comes looking for Cain and Able and when he finds Cain, he says, Where is your brother? and Cain says - Am I my brother's keeper? The answer comes to him from the ground, from the blood of his brother crying out to him from the ground, and Cain can never feel at home in the world again.

Then, the children of Israel are only three months out of slavery in Egypt - only three months into their trip across the wilderness to the promised land - when they come to Mt. Sinai. Moses leaves them and goes up to Mt. Sinai to talk to God. Moses is gone for thirty days. The children of Israel are getting bored and restless, and they think maybe Moses has died up in the mountain - so they talk Aaron into making an idol for them - an idol that will let them do whatever they want. They worship the idol and they sit down to eat and drink and they get up to party. Eugene Peterson says in his translation of the Bible, quite accurately if you look at the Hebrew, that "the party got wild." Just as the party is getting wild, Moses comes down from the mountain and he's got with him these two tablets that contain on them the precious commandments of God.

When Moses sees what the Israelites are doing, he is enraged and he smashes the idol - and then, of all things, he smashes the commandments of God! The children of Israel stand there aghast at what they have done and spend the next forty years walking in circles through the wilderness. They had lost their way.

Then David sees Bathsheba and takes her and she becomes pregnant. He sends Bathsheba's husband Uriah off to battle and puts him in the front lines so that Uriah will be killed in battle. David has Uriah killed to cover up what he has done. Nathan comes and tells David a story and at the end of the story, David is enraged and says, who has done this? - and Nathan says to him - you are the man. David writes one of the most pained psalms in the Bible, Psalm 51 - if you read the introduction you will see that it says he wrote it just after Nathan talked to him about what he had done to Uriah. The psalm says - Create in me a clean heart Oh God, withdraw not your Holy Spirit from me.

And then, there is Isaiah. When Isaiah catches a glimpse of the glory of God, he immediately responds by

beating his chest and saying - Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.

And then, Peter, in the garden, while Jesus is dragging his way to a cross. Peter denies Jesus three times - and then a rooster crows and Peter realizes what he has done - and leaves where he has been and weeps bitterly.

There is a theme that runs throughout scripture that I want to call the experience or the realization of cosmic accountability - the realization that there is something outside of ourselves that expects something of us - and that when we fail to meet those expectations, we hear a rooster crow and experience remorse.

Now, I want to be very careful about the way I talk about this because a lot of us experience - maybe all of us to some degree or another experience -- what Dr. Joan Borysenko calls "unhealthy guilt" and "unhealthy shame." A lot of us experience feelings of guilt and shame about things that we shouldn't ought to be ashamed of or guilty about. We experience destructive feelings of shame and guilt. We ought not to feel ashamed of, or guilty about, anything that has to do with the way God made us, for example. We shouldn't ever feel ashamed or guilty about our bodies, our sexuality, the way we talk, ideas that come into our mind, feelings that we have. We should never feel guilty or ashamed of the way God made us, but a lot of us do.

There are even sometimes occasions when we feel guilty or ashamed about things that have happened to us over which we had no control. I would never understood this except I was mugged and stabbed once years ago. For months afterwards, I felt guilty about it and ashamed of it. I kept asking myself what I might have done to cause someone to mug and stab me. It is a common experience for victims to feel guilty or ashamed about something that was done to them. We should never feel ashamed of something over which we had no control - we should never feel ashamed of being a victim.

So, I want to be very careful about the way I talk about what I'm trying to talk about this morning, because many of us have feelings of shame and guilt about things that we shouldn't be ashamed of or guilty about. It is actually impolite - spiritually impolite - for any of us to feel guilty about anything to do with the way God made us. That's pretty impolite - to feel guilty about some aspect of the way God made us. We should never feel guilty or ashamed about something that has happened to us.

Cathy Guisewhite, who writes the comic strip Cathy, says that like the four basic food groups, there are four basic guilt groups. The four basic guilt groups are food, career, relationship and mothers. We all feel unhealthy and inappropriate guilt - the only way I know to deal with this is through education and through the process of self-revelation in a setting where we will be accepted. Usually, the best place to do this is in a good therapist's office, or in a good therapeutic - a well-supervised therapeutic - group where we can reveal ourselves to others and be accepted.

But having said as carefully as I know how that there is inappropriate and unhealthy guilt and shame which we ought to therapeutically and educationally attend to, let me also say that there are healthy and appropriate experiences of guilt and shame. We appropriately experience remorse because we know that we have failed to do what we ought to have done and we have done what we ought not to have done. My experience of life is that after I have healed all the destructive guilt and shame in my life - after I have

psychoanalyzed all of that away, there is still a sense within me that there is someone or something outside of myself that expects better of me. When I fail to meet those expectations, I have a deep sense of remorse and am called into a new accountability about my life and what I am doing with it.

I'm talking this month on the theme, why pay attention to the Bible. There are some reasons that some people may choose not to pay attention to the Bible. It is an old collection of literature - thousands of years old. I myself do not believe that the Bible, in some narrow understanding, is a perfect or an inerrant document. The writers of the Bible were human beings who wrote out of the understandings of their times. The writers of the Bible didn't have any special information about science or medicine or mathematics. The writers of the Bible assumed the scientific understanding of their time. They thought that the earth was flat and there was a heaven above, and an underworld below. They didn't know that the earth revolved around the sun. They didn't know there were other planets. They didn't know about germs or chromosomes or lasers or quarks. They didn't know about black holes. They didn't know about DNA.

The writers of the Bible also often wrote out of the cultural understandings of their times. So that within the Bible, you will find references and thoughts that are violent, that seem to endorse militarism and violence. You will find ideas picked up from the cultures of the time that support the idea of the inferiority of women. You will find xenophobia. You will find homophobia. You will find racism. You will find, within the Bible, references that today we know are not the word of God! But yet, within the Bible, there are reoccurring themes that explain to me - that articulate for me - my own experience of life in a way that nothing else I have found does.

So, I pay attention to the Bible because, in the midst of all of the human imperfection of the writers who wrote this book, there are themes that resonate with my deepest experiences of life. And so the Bible becomes, for me, my book of salvation because it helps me understand who I am - and what's happening to me in this strange journey that I am through life.

One of the themes of the Bible that I have found nothing else to explain the way the Bible does is this experience of feeling accountable for my life and for what I do with it - as though there is something or someone outside of me that has expectations of me. I can't just do what I want, I can't just live the way I might feel like living, because something deep inside me seems to know that I am accountable for this life. And when I fall short, I experience remorse and pain.

I hear roosters crow in my life when I have failed to live up to the claim on my life. I hear roosters crow, and they call me to a new accountability.

Peter could have never been the first bishop of the church, you know, without the experience of hearing the rooster crow. If you read Luke 22, you will see that Jesus predicts for Peter that he will deny him three times and then hear the rooster crow. Jesus tells that when he hears the rooster crow, then he will become the kind of person who will be able to support the brothers and sisters. Whatever was wrong in Peter's life, he needed to have the experience of failure and disappointment, and to be called into accountability about it, in order to become the kind of person who could be the church's first bishop.

I believe in the Bible because I've heard roosters crow in my life.

I remember the exact instant that I became a man.

What brought this to mind this week is that Jon Powers, who is the chaplain at Ohio Wesleyan University, is visiting with us and talking with us about the possibility of a May seminar for Ohio Wesleyan students to help them determine whether they have a calling to ministry or to religious service. Jon brought with him a student, Beth, who has a dual major. She has a dual major in astrophysics and pre-ministerial studies. As I was meeting with Jon and Beth this week, it started me thinking about my own experience of college.

When I was at college, I also had a dual major. My dual major was political science and beer.

I was a particularly immature college student. I was like an animal who had been let out of the cage - I studied hard all week because I wanted to get decent grades (not really because I wanted to learn), and then all weekend long I drank beer and did whatever else is the consequence of spending the weekend drinking beer. So I spent my weeks with my head in books - not really learning anything - and my weekend with my head in suds.

After about two years of this, I started experiencing a vague uneasiness about life. The campus started feeling too closed in to me - too narrow - too cramped -- and I was less and less happy until one day I went to the chaplain's office and asked the chaplain's secretary if there was any place off campus I could volunteer. She sent me to the most poverty stricken neighborhood in the city where my college was to volunteer at a newly established Head Start program.

I spent two hours every Thursday morning at the Head Start Center. The first Thursday morning I showed up - the teachers sort of looked at me - looked me up and down - and said, Why are you here? I said, I'm here to volunteer, and they scratched their heads. I was the first volunteer they had ever had, and they didn't know what to do with me. They didn't even ask my name. Finally, they said, well, we guess you can play with the children. They didn't introduce me to the children or tell them why I was there. But I went over and tried to figure out how to play with the children and I didn't know how to go about it.

There was one boy in the class who saved me. His name was Jamar. As soon as he saw me, Jamar wrapped his arms around my leg and he followed me everywhere! He wrestled with me when I sat down. He brought me books to read to him. The other students would gather around and do what Jamar was doing, but Jamar attached himself to me as though I were an answer to prayer.

I went home for Christmas break. I was gone for several weeks and when I came back, the next Thursday, I went to the Head Start Center to volunteer. I was across the street from the church where the Head Start Center was housed, and the children were outside in the church yard playing. Jamar looked over in my direction and with all the excitement in his voice that you could imagine, he shouted as loud as he could, "It's the man! It's the man!"

I looked around to see who he was talking about. I realized he was talking about me. Tears came to my eyes as though I had been slapped - because even though I considered myself a boy and even though I was living

like a boy and acting like a boy, there was someone in the world who thought I was a man. That Thursday morning in Reading, Pennsylvania, in a neighborhood that very few college students ever visited, I started to become a man. Jamar's call was, for me, a rooster's crow.

One of the signs of the grace of God is that God does not leave us alone to destroy ourselves, to live wasteful lives or to stew in our own juices.

I watched the movie "Saving Private Ryan" on TV last night. It was broadcast on commercial network TV. It was on network TV. "Saving Private Ryan" is as graphic and realistic a portrayal of war as you will see anywhere. It was a mind-bending experience to watch it on network TV, because you would see these dreadful scenes of people with great bravery giving their lives for something that they believed in, and then the network would flip to a commercial for Carnival Cruises or for new Chevy's. Watching the movie and then watching the commercials, I started asking, is this why we ask people to sacrifice their lives? - for Carnival Cruises and new Chevy's?

America has to have a higher purpose - a higher reason and purpose than Carnival Cruises and new Chevy's. It could not be that people have died the way they have so that we can drive new Chevy's and take Carnival Cruises. As we think about going to war again, last night was a rooster's crow for me as an American.

If we're going to ask people to die - if we're going to ask people to kill other people -- it has got to be for something more than Carnival Cruises and new Chevy's. Something, someone, expects better of us.

I believe in the Bible because it explains this experience I have that something, someone, will not leave us alone. .. someone keeps calling us to deeper living and higher purposes. Thanks be to God.