

"Whad'Ya Know?"

A meditation based on Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

January 31, 2010

Redlands United Church of Christ

Sharon R. Graff

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Whadd'ya know? [Not much, you?!!!] Well, now I know who listens to public radio!!! Michael Feldman's radio comedy program asks that probing question each week, and the audience dutifully responds, setting the stage for all there to learn something new. Today's three biblical passages stretch our knowledge of God; they challenge the motivation for our actions; and they predict with precise accuracy where our following of Jesus may take us. To them we could ask, "Whadd'ya know?" and they would respond, "We know God equips us for our tasks...We know that love is more important than any spiritual gift...We know that God's love extends to embrace every creature and that we may get in deep trouble because of it..." Whadd'ya know? Of all these things we know from today's readings, I invite us to know how to love.

I learned Paul's lesson on love at a very early age, and as with many of life's lessons, I learned it as much from negative input as from positive. The church I grew up in could have been the Corinthians...they loved to bicker! I remember my mother coming home from some church meeting, steaming mad, because they—you know, that nebulous "committee of they"?—"they" didn't want the youth to square dance in the church hall because "they" believed dancing was not proper. Another time, I recall one of the members—a card-carrying constituent of the John Birch Society—storming out of worship on a Sunday morning because the minister dared to suggest that Jesus was Jewish. Still another time, when the denomination had decided that the communion table was to be open to anyone, the small-minded leaders of

that congregation got themselves all in a twist, because, after all, everyone knew that God knew that some animals were more equal than others. From all this, I could have learned to stay away from church!

But, thankfully, when I was a young teenager, the church called a minister who knew that love was more important than anything else...including dancing...and Jesus' heritage...and even communion itself. This minister knew that how we treated one another was the true mark of being Christian. This minister, when people would hiss and spit and sling angry comments at one another, would smile deeply, bow his head in prayer, and preach yet another series of sermons on the never-ending, expansive and inclusive love of God. I kept his printed sermons for many years, and while in seminary, delighted in noticing just how many times he spoke of God's love. We were the 20<sup>th</sup>-century version of the church at Corinth, and he was our Apostle Paul!

Here at Redlands UCC, we are pretty good at the love stuff. We don't do it in a gushy, romanticized, Hallmark-card sort of manner. Rather in a thousand ways, in countless acts, we show one another true Christianity by offering kindness and patience and gentleness. More often than not, I see us restraining ourselves from being rude or arrogant or irritable or resentful. We are not the Corinthians, although from time to time, we do engage in lively debate and certainly do not agree on every little thing! Of late, however, I am noticing that there are little agitations that grow into resentments...unthinking comments that end up hurting another...and so, it seems timely, that the lectionary invites us to learn again the lesson of love.

What does it mean to love? Really love one another? I think it means all of what Paul suggests to us today, and more. I think it means all of what Jesus was saying, and more, when he speaks about including the so-called "outsiders" in the category of "beloved by God." Such teaching got him thrown out of his hometown and almost killed; yet this is precisely the kind of love we are invited to practice. I think this kind of love means being vulnerable and honest,

persistent and hopeful, wanting and working for the best for one another no matter what. I think this kind of love taught by Paul and modeled by Jesus in today's passages indicts us when we choose to withhold forgiveness from another, even as it challenges us to look beyond the irritations or the hurt or even the unloving actions of another, to see in that other, a beloved child of God. Love, you see, is for our benefit, as much as it is for the strength of the whole body. To hold anger or resentment or even little agitations within hurts you, physically, mentally, spiritually. So Paul and Jesus admonish us to practice love—not sappiness, not walk-all-over-me agreement—but love that is patient and kind and not boastful or arrogant or rude.

And now, it is time for a story. My favorite story of embodied love, tangible, and so very clearly transferable to our community life together. I've told it a couple of times in the last 8 years, and now, at the beginning of this new church year, it bears repeating. Hear now with me Martin Bell's story of "The Porcupine Whose Name Didn't Matter."

"Joggi stood before the mystery of his own life much as any other porcupine might have. That is to say, he was exceedingly cautious in the face of it. I do not mean to imply that it was difficult for Joggi to acknowledge the mystery. On the contrary! He had no trouble whatsoever recognizing the ebb and flow of his own limitations and the infinite variety of possibility within his universe. Joggi knew about the ongoing beat of life. The daily. The humdrum. It throbbed somewhere deep within him. Beneath the prickly spines. In the center of his tiny body. A thumping. Steady. Insistent. Unrelenting. The mystery.

"Totally aware, more lucid perhaps than he desired to be, Joggi lived and loved, laughed and cried—tentatively. One might say that anger, frustration and tenderness had been so delicately woven into the fabric of his person as to make difficult our perceiving any of them.

"Joggi was cautious in the face of the mystery. So cautious, in fact, that almost nobody knew his name. Most of the animals in the forest had seen the near-sighted porcupine moving slowly about, poking his pointed black nose into the vegetation, bristling and puffing, squinting

and stumbling. Few had spoken to him. Now and then someone would say hello, and ask after his health—an attempt to strike up a conversation of sorts. This never really led to anything, however, because Joggi would not—no, that isn't fair—Joggi could not risk such a head-on collision.

Joggi's hesitancy usually expressed itself this way. When asked what his name was, he would answer, 'It doesn't matter! It doesn't matter what my name is! Can't you see? What difference does it make? I won't tell you what my name is, because it doesn't matter!'

"That would be the reply. And, more often than not, that would be the end of the conversation. Joggi could not embrace another, he would not tell anyone his name, and the result was almost always the same: the other animals avoided him.

"One significant exception to this was Gamiel, the raccoon. Gamiel did not mind Joggi's reticence at all. It didn't bother him when the prickly little porcupine was silent for hours at a time, and he had never even thought to ask about Joggi's name.

"Gamiel could remember very little before the accident, and much of what had happened since was blurred somewhere in the recesses of his brain, all but lost to memory.

"Raccoons are generally alert and resourceful creatures with keen perceptions and excellent memories. But all of this had changed for Gamiel since the accident. Ironically, he wasn't even certain why. All he remembered was a flash of light, and then something hard had ripped into the side of his head. His whole body had convulsed with the pain; white hot, wet, thrashing, God-when-will-it-stop pain that had pitched him bleeding from the tree into the underbrush and had driven him forward without his left side pulling any weight at all, by instinct only; screaming pain that shrieked behind his eyes the one and only word of hope he knew, and then, as suddenly as it had come, was gone.

"If only Gamiel had looked at himself in the quiet waters of the forest pond, he would have recognized why no one would come near him anymore. Everything had changed. He

didn't even look like a raccoon. The whole left side of his head was missing, he had no fur at all around his eyes where once the elegant mask had been, and he could barely pull himself along with his right front leg. Gamiel had only to look at himself in the forest pond to realize why everyone hurried past when he called out to them.

"But the crippled raccoon never again would look at his reflection in the quiet waters. Not because he wasn't willing to see his disfigured image, but rather because he wasn't able to see anything at all. Ever since the accident, Gamiel had been totally blind.

"Joggi found Gamiel about two days after the pain had stopped, and approximately three hours after the raccoon had given up all hope.

"A sound close by. Gamiel trembled.

'Is someone there?' he whispered.

"At first Joggi didn't say anything. He looked at Gamiel and noted that his left side was paralyzed. Then, after a moment, he realized that the animal was blind. The nearsighted porcupine moved closer.

'You're a raccoon,' he said out loud.

'Oh, yes, indeed I am!' Gamiel stuttered. 'Only I think something awful has happened to me. I cannot see anything at all, and I can barely move. Please, tell me what has happened to me! Am I going to die? Why won't anyone stop when I cry out? Why can't I see? What has happened? Please . . . I'm afraid . . .'

And in Gamiel's searching, empty, sightless eyes tears began to form.

"Joggi sniffed. In the center of his body the beat of life. Faster now. Answer him. Don't just stand there with your spines bristling and your heart pounding. Answer him!

"Joggi spoke with a steady and quiet voice.

'I believe you have been shot. I cannot be certain, of course, but that is my opinion. Are you in a great deal of pain?'

'No. At first there was pain. But I can't feel anything now. In fact, my whole left side is numb. No. No more pain. Just, well . . . nothing.' Gamiel's eyes opened and closed aimlessly.

"Joggi was silent. His tiny body shivering; breathing labored, short difficult breaths. What now? An extended period of time.

"Gamiel spoke in a hoarse voice, 'Are you still there?'

"Joggi's heart beat faster. 'Yes, I'm here. I was just wondering what to do now.'

'Oh, you don't have to do anything! Honestly, I mean that! You don't have to do anything at all. Just stay with me for a little while. Just be there. Just don't go away. Please. I'm afraid! You won't go away, will you?'

"Joggi swallowed hard. 'No,' he said deliberately and with as much conviction as he could muster, 'no, I won't go away.'

'Thank you,' Gamiel said quietly. And then the wounded raccoon fell asleep.

"Joggi stood beside Gamiel all that day. Then when evening came, a cool breeze made his spines whistle slightly. The sound woke the raccoon.

'Are you still there?'

'Yes. I told you I wouldn't go away.'

'I'm hungry.'

'I thought you probably would be,' Joggi replied. 'Can you move at all?'

Gamiel stretched his right leg forward and pulled himself along the ground.

'Good for you!' said Joggi. 'That will do nicely. I can bring you food, but you will need to maneuver for yourself in order to get water. I believe you have enough strength to reach the pond; it isn't very far, and I can guide you directly to it. Come on. Let's see how it goes.'

"That was how it began. An unusual partnership, perhaps. Certainly the rest of the animals in the forest were surprised to see the pair of them moving slowly about, managing to live from one day to the next without really doing much of anything. Occasionally Joggi would

describe something for Gamiel, or answer a question, or direct the crippled raccoon toward a tasty morsel of food. Gamiel, for his part, chattered happily, basked in the sun, and generally enjoyed the company of his new friend.

“They made a home for one another, Joggi and Gamiel. Not a regular home exactly; not a place. More like a shelter from the excessive pain that each of them had known. A coming together of two lonely and frightened creatures. A bond of trust that asked no questions, expected nothing at all except the merciful being together that made waking up tomorrow possible. Gamiel didn’t mind when Joggi was silent for hours at a time. He could sense the beat. Thumping, ongoing, steady. There. It was enough.

Joggi was with Gamiel for one full year before the injured raccoon finally died. It was a quiet event, almost a surprise but that Joggi had been expecting it for so long. Gamiel’s strength just finally gave out and the mystery of life enveloped him completely.

‘You know, I’ve been expecting this for quite some time now,’ Joggi said to the raccoon who lay there on the ground, no longer able to hear him. ‘I am surprised that you managed to stay alive as long as you did. I knew the day that I found you it couldn’t last. Not for long. You’d been hurt too badly. I never expected you to live this long. And yet . . . well, I hoped that it might have been a little longer. Do you know what I mean? You see, I never knew anybody very well before. Not that we ever talked much, or anything like that. But I felt like I knew you anyway. Even without talking. I have a really hard time talking to anybody, or getting to know anybody. And nobody ever wants to get very close to me because of all these spines that I have sticking out of me. I don’t suppose you ever knew that I had spines sticking out all over me, did you? They’re sort of like needles and they’re sharp. I guess they scare everybody a bit. I hope you don’t mind my talking so much. I really don’t know why I’m talking to you now. I suppose it’s just that I had a little more to tell you before you died; I have been wanting to say this for almost a year and never quite found the right time to do it.

It's too late now, I realized, but I've been wanting to tell you that it has been an honor to meet you, and that you are indeed a very handsome raccoon, and that I would like to consider you my friend.'

"The porcupine cleared his throat. A tear dropped onto his nose. In the center of his body the ongoing beat of life. Beneath the prickly spines. Wildly thumping. Tell him! Don't just stand there with your spines bristling and your heart pounding. Tell him!

'Oh, and by the way, I'd like to tell you what my name is. It's a funny name, I suppose. But I'd like you to know what it is.'

A moment's hesitation and then, 'It's Joggi.'

"Without another word, the tiny porcupine turned away from Gamiel's lifeless form and began to cry.

"What Joggi did not see, but what he felt in every fiber of his being, was the Spirit of life itself, God the Creator, and Joggi knew that he would never be the same again."

Friends, we face a new church year...new officers...new area leaders...new visions into which Spirit is calling us. This afternoon, we install our new Associate Pastor, and look forward to the many ways his ministry will bring growth on our shared journey. We have each chosen new Epiphany words—and if you haven't yet, they are still available in a basket in the Gathering Area. These words offer an invitation to be aware of Spirit's presence, nudging, prodding, offering you opportunities for growth in this new year. What'ya know? I know, that in this year ahead, we can love more fully.

Amen and Blessed Be!

"Who Is Who?"

A meditation based on John 10:7-14

January 31, 2010

On the Occasion of the Installation of The Rev. Leif Lind as Associate Pastor

Redlands United Church of Christ

Sharon R. Graff

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Dear Leif—

Welcome to ministry with the Redlands United Church of Christ! I have been mentally writing this letter to you from the first time we spoke about the possibility of you as a minister here in this good congregation. Now that the day has arrived, and a crowd has assembled, I am delighted to share this letter with you and I invite the rest of you to listen. A few years have passed, Leif, since our initial conversation. You entered my office, concerned that you might not be able to remain in ministry for much longer with your beloved Adventists. Yet, thankfully, as we look back from the vantage of today, the years have been kind. Thanks to God, the Glendale City congregation called a progressive minister, and now with Smuts and me and Glendale City Adventist and Redlands UCC, you can offer your considerable gifts in two places and with two vibrant congregations! God is, indeed, very good!

Leif, these intervening years also have brought you anticipation and joy, clarity and confidence, not to mention a whirlwind class on UCC polity set within the dramatic backdrop of the most recent General Synod. You have probably learned more about the UCC than you ever wanted! Yet I tell you, that there is ever so much more to know!

The passage you have wisely chosen for this special occasion—the shepherd discourse from John's gospel—is a fitting place for us to continue the conversation about your ministry

here. Often these verses are used to describe the pastor's role within the church.

Metaphorically, we who are ordained and called into ministry are transformed in the reader's mind into what Jesus here calls "the good shepherd." We take on the mantle, our hands adhere to the shepherd's staff, and by implication and in that role, we try to lead in the image of Jesus' leadership, to become the shepherd as Jesus is shepherd. I caution you, Leif, about cloaking yourself in that role, and ask you to consider who is who in this particular passage. Is the role of shepherd even open to anyone besides Jesus?

As you know, from having lived all over the world, we people love images, metaphors, similes, and allegories. We find meaning as we talk about the big things in life by representing those big things in the everyday items we see around us. Jesus knew this, and we can imagine him looking across the hillside, seeing a flock of sheep, noticing both a watchful shepherd and a secure and protective gate. Then within vision of that shepherd and that gate, Jesus talks with his disciples about his own life and purpose and ministry. Elsewhere in John's gospel, Jesus does the same. He uses the stuff of life to speak of himself, not others, as "the true vine" or the "living water" or "the bread of life" or "the light of the world." This fourth gospel is riddled with images that point to truth...the same truth...that it is in Jesus, in following in his footsteps, that life abundant for the rest of us becomes real!

You are an astute student of scripture. You know that there are a handful of other biblical passages that refer to the pastor as shepherd, and if you wanted to shine a light on that pastoral role into which you now step, you would have chosen one of those for today. Instead, you invite us to contemplate a passage that speaks of Jesus as the good shepherd, not those of us with Reverend in our name. I, for one, am deeply grateful to you for your choice! For if you, or any of us, follow that metaphor of "pastor as shepherd" very far into the sheepfold, it will soon isolate us from the very flock we seek to serve. This passage offers a surprising, but

helpful and precautionary teaching when Jesus is the only one in the shepherd costume. Then, and only then, can you and I, and all our colleagues, take our rightful places as sheep; sheep who bleat together and eat together and share soothing waters together and are offered by the one shepherd, enough for every day's living.

While I can imagine for you, Leif, many moments of shepherding in the years ahead, I urge you to see as this passage suggests, that in each moment and every day, you are also a sheep. This is no more obvious than in the last few verses of the passage where Jesus states that he, as both the Good Shepherd who leads the sheep to life and the gate by which they enter that life, Jesus it is who will lay down his life for these sheep. Jesus leads the way for all of us by getting out of the way...we lead by remaining in the sheepfold. You, Rev. Lind, do not have to lay your life down for Redlands UCC, and that is very good news for those of us who love you! And in those moments when you are called to be a shepherd—when a troubled soul needs comfort, or a dying person needs confidence, or a couple of agitated cats need to quit hissing and start purring—in those moments, please remember that this passage assures you that you are never the only shepherd to whom they may turn, nor am I. Jesus has already taken the singular shepherd costume from the closet and he wears it well.

Today, Leif, we are “installing” you as Associate Pastor. It’s a funny word to use—the word “installation”—as if you were a mere moving part in the ecclesial machine we call church. I read recently that a minister who is so installed probably is not going to change anything, at least nothing important to the essence of the machine itself. Such installation is something like exchanging a new fan belt for one that has worn out or broken. The imagery uses the language of the modern, industrial world. But you and I both know we are beyond that modern world, and moving quickly into a post-modern reality, with living organisms replacing machines, with the physical relativity of an Einstein replacing the immutable laws of a Descartes or a

Newton, and with relationships replacing hierarchy. Though today's service is called an installation, this church is never just a machine into which you are being inserted. Today's biblical imagery reminds you, Leif, and all the rest of us, that Redlands UCC is a flock. These images of Jesus as the good shepherd and Jesus as the gate are intensely relational; for gate and shepherd have no meaning without the presence of we sheep, who are in relationship with one another and with our one shepherd, Jesus, the Christ.

Leif, your leadership among us—your fellow sheep—is really about empowering those in this congregation to discover, develop, and use their gifts as well. So today, from the safety of this sheepfold, we bless you. We bless you with the knowledge that the shepherd costume is already taken and wouldn't fit you anyway! We bless you with the grace of our honesty and with the promise of forgiveness. We bless you with our hopes and our fears. We bless you, Leif, by welcoming you into this wonderful, vibrant, fun and playful, at times challenging, always living and breathing body-of-a-sheepfold known as Redlands United Church of Christ!

In great sincerity and with deep hope, I close this letter with my signature, Amen and Blessed Be!