

Sermon: Going to the Mattresses

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Scripture: Genesis 32:22-30; Luke 22:39-44

As you may have surmised based on our Summer at the Movies series (which will be returning this August with a new theme), one of my favorite pastimes is watching films. I used to be a big Oscar fan, but in recent years, I've found myself drifting from that interest (and, given the wild reactions to last Sunday's Oscar broadcast, I feel better about that than I ever have before). In undergraduate studies, I took a few film courses and developed the ability to look at movies critically, so, when I study scripture, movies come to mind frequently.

Now I like all sorts of genres from the classics to superhero movies and arthouse films, but "rom-coms" are not generally my thing. Give me a good Audrey Hepburn or Cary Grant movie over the latest Jennifer Lopez film any day. I do, however, love some of the ones I grew up with, like the adorably funny and now wildly obsolete *You've Got Mail* starring Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks.

In case you haven't seen it, *You've Got Mail* is the story of Joe, played by Hanks, and Kathleen, played by Ryan, who find one another in a chat room back in the days when chat rooms were very much a thing. They strike up a friendship that over time will turn romantic, but first, there will be all kinds of misunderstandings and challenges—as is typical of rom-coms. Before they've met face-to-face, Joe, who is a very successful businessman in the book superstore business, will advise Kathleen, the shop owner of an independent children's bookstore, on how to handle business situations with competitors. I suppose I should mention that Joe's business,

FoxBooks, is the very business situation Kathleen needs advice on handling. The existence of Kathleen's little children's bookstore is threatened by Joe's FoxBooks, who are opening a location just around the corner from hers. She's concerned it will put her out of business.

In the wonderful anonymity of the internet, it's easy for Joe and Kathleen not to meet and so Joe doesn't know that he's really advising Kathleen on how to handle *his* business. So he gives her the best advice he can, which comes from one of Joe's favorite films, *The Godfather*. He advises her: "You have to go to the mattresses," and when she doesn't know what that means, he describes it by saying that *The Godfather* is the sum of all wisdom, it's the answer to any question. In *this* case, the question is: how do to handle the business competition? "Go to the mattresses," he says, prepare for battle, get ready for the struggle. In the context of *The Godfather*, this advice is brutal, Joe means she must obliterate the competition. He says it's going to get rough and you've got to be willing to fight to the death. Kathleen, a gentle soul, has some difficulty with this, so Joe convinces her that this is not about friends, it's about business. It's about survival. You're already in a battle, if you want to win, you can't abandon it. The way out is the way in. You must fight.

In our lives, there are so many times when we've got to go to the mattresses—hopefully not in the violent way of *The Godfather*—but in all kinds of other ways, we will have to summon the inner strength to fight difficult, sometimes brutal battles, with forces that will sometimes seem beyond our control. Those confrontations will take different shapes at various points in our lives. When we're young, maybe it's a difficult test or learning how to be a person in the world. As adults, our battles are more

likely to involve our employment lives or maybe a difficult health situation. Anyone who's ever been a parent knows the skirmishes sure to ensue as we try to raise headstrong little humans. Broken relationships present their own conflicts. Battles in life come in all different shapes and sizes, but as Joe tells Kathleen, if you want to win, you've got to fight them. Go to the mattresses.

Most of our battles can be fought. We can wrestle with difficult situations and most of the time, we'll make it out because most of our battles have foes we can somehow conquer. But what happens when the battle is spiritual? What do we do when the challenge we are wrestling with is God? Or what if it's not even God we're wrestling with, but belief, itself? How do we handle the crises of faith that all of us will, at some point in our lives, surely face?

This is the question posed in the seventh chapter of Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, the lens through which we are worshipping together this Lenten season in our series "Lunar Faith." Throughout this series, we've been trying to shift our perspective on darkness, which has often been maligned not just in society, but in our own faith. In chapter seven, titled "The Dark Night of the Soul," Taylor takes us into the darkness that occurs when our soul is "severely tested." She writes that this is, "often to the point of losing faith, by circumstances beyond all control" (p. 134). She talks about this through the lens of sixteenth-century Christian monk John of the Cross whose poem *The Dark Night of the Soul* was written as he lived through eleven months in a monastery prison, where he had been put as punishment for his work with Theresa of Avila, a nun, with whom he sought to reform a particular order of Catholic belief

centered on contemplative spirituality. John and Theresa believed rightly that contemplative spirituality is difficult to practice without silence and solitude, something they didn't see much of as it was then being practiced.

I think we can all agree that being put into prison for practicing your faith is a massive challenge to undergo. For much of his imprisonment, John was thrown into solitary confinement—which, if unpleasant in the 21st century, was a whole different kind of torture in the 1500's. Throughout that time, the only light John saw all day was a tiny sliver in his prison wall. This kind of darkness was how he lived for nine months of his imprisonment before he finally escaped. During that time, John would find ways of talking about darkness and relating to it. Then, he recorded what he learned.

As Taylor herself notes, this “dark night” is not one in which John found a way to handle his difficulties by leaning on God—though these kinds of moments happen for all of us and they are valid, enriching experiences all on their own. What John of the Cross experienced, however, was different. It was a dark night in which John was forced to wrestle with belief, itself. This isn't John just talking about a bad day or a moment of doubt in his belief system. In fact, in some ways, what he's referencing is a collapse of that system altogether.

This kind of collapse is not unique to John of the Cross. Taylor describes the point in her own faith journey in which the clear, simplicity in the lessons of her Sunday school classes and the creeds began to lose their ability to comfort and sustain her faith. For many this is a time when theological formulas and belief in a set of defined doctrine make less sense in the face of the abject contradictions we face in life. This is wrestling with

belief in a rough and tumble way, like the way that Jacob wrestles with God in the 32nd chapter of Genesis.

Jacob's journey is remarkable. He's the grandson of Abraham, the father of the faith, but his life is not exactly the model of morality. He gets by through deception: cheating his brother out of his birthright, tricking his father into blessing him rather than his brother, and then he undergoes a profound change for the better and as he begins to worship God. Later, in one incredibly memorable moment in scripture, Jacob wrestles with God on the banks of the Jabbok River. From this wrestling, a battle which goes the length of one dark night, Jacob earns the new name "Israel." This name, "Israel" means one who *struggles with God* and it is the name by which the nation created from his offspring will be called.

When we look throughout the story of the Israelites from as far back as memory goes, we see that the ways in which Jacob struggles can be seen to parallel the turbulent story of the Israelite people. As we think about Jacob's wrestling match with God on his own dark night, we might think of the ways in which we have wrestled with God and with belief. We might flash back to our own dark nights of the soul. Do we resist wrestling or, do we go in as Jacob did, determined to fight that battle? Many of us who have wrestled in this way, can perhaps remember the moment we gave in and allowed ourselves to enter that struggle. How long we spend in that dark night may be somewhat dependent on how long we resist going into it.

For some people, the dark night of the soul causes a deconstruction of their faith. But this deconstruction should not be confused with a loss or destruction of faith. My own dark night led to this very kind of

deconstruction. You've heard me say I was raised unchurched, and that's true, but it wasn't because we never went to church. I felt I had no spiritual community because we didn't go to any church for a very long period of time. I never had a church family to lean on, not for any significant period of time. I always felt like a newcomer and an outsider. This wasn't unique to my church experience, of course, because as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I knew early on that I was simply not like most of my peers and was therefore an "outsider" in most situations. "Outside" wasn't how I wanted to feel, but I knew it was what I was. I tried for 35 years to fit in and it wasn't until a total collapse of my life in which I was finally able to accept who I was *out loud* that I was able to find the places I actually fit in.

I realize for some of you who've been a part of the same church for much of your life, this may seem like a foreign idea, but it's not a foreign feeling to lesbians, gays, and transgender individuals. We are made, just like our straight, cis-gender allies, in the image of the Triune God, but we are told sometimes very directly, that we are abominations, unwelcome, and don't belong. For those of us who want to fit in, but don't—who want to believe, but are told we can't ever really belong—church can be painful. It's not just that we feel unwelcome, it's that we've been explicitly told we are less than, that something is wrong with us. As you can imagine, being told you don't belong in the church brings many of us to a "dark night." And when that happens, we can surrender to it, allow ourselves to wrestle with what it means to believe in God in the face of a faith tradition whose loudest voices are telling us we shouldn't exist as God made us, or we can resist the wrestling we must do, and lose our faith completely—which plunges us into a darkness that is wholly outside of faith. I chose the former path and found

my way back to Christianity. And the only reason I stand before you as a Christian pastor, is because I found people all along the path of my own dark night, who kept the light of God burning in my soul. That fire burning inside me reminded me that God was there, whether I could see God or not. And this is the fire that keeps John of the Cross going as he surrenders to the dark night that descended upon him in solitary captivity for all those long, painful months.

Like so many before me, I had to go to the mattresses with belief. I had to ask myself if the hurtful words and interpretations of human beings were going to destroy the love and influence of Jesus, the enfolding presence of the Spirit I had always felt, and the image of God in which I was created. Ultimately, my answer was that I was not going to let the hatred and exclusionary practices of imperfect humans who are *not God* keep me away from the unending, perfect love of *the One who is God*. I wasn't going to let the discriminatory practices of human creators of religion keep me from fulfilling the call of the inclusive love of the Creator of life, itself. And even in following that call, the path has been rocky. During the search and call process, I found myself amidst another dark night as churches loved me as a minister, but could not get past the simple fact that I was going to marry a woman. I demonstrated my qualifications and fitness for ministry time and again, but when my Donna came up, my prospects disappeared. That is, until I met with a little church in Manchester, MD, who realized, thankfully, that my sexual orientation is not the most interesting thing about me as a minister or as a person.

My path to pastoring this church should be a reminder to all of us not to give up on people because they don't quite fit the image we hold in our heads of what a church person looks like. How many people and things in our lives have we passed by because they are different than what we expect? How many beautiful creations of God have been left on the ash heap, the blessings of their presence in our lives lost forever because they're a little different? How much of our ability to see the glory of God is limited by our own unwillingness to let ourselves experience it in the people around us who, though different, are nonetheless lovingly created by the exact same God? If we are truly loving as Jesus loves, then we don't need to worry about missing it. If we are truly loving as Jesus loves, our ministry will flourish.

The "dark night of the soul" is intended to draw you nearer to God, and it will, if you let it. Moments before he is arrested, Jesus goes up to the Mount of Olives to pray. He knows what he is about to face and that in doing that, he must surrender to God's will. He goes to God in prayer, earnestly asking God to take this cup from him, and at the same time, knowing full well that he's got to face this hard thing. That his mission of loving and serving the least of these, of caring for those no one wants among them, of showing up for the people and causes forgotten by the rest of society, of following the call to justice... that mission is going to send him to his death.

And yet, he does it anyway, because, following his example, someday, those who obey him go on to build communities who will love, affirm, and include everyone. Communities where gay and trans kids can be who God created them to be without shame or the need to abandon their faith tradition to find the presence of God. Communities where the poor and the

sick can find respite for their bodies as well as their souls. Communities where people who've fallen on hard times can get a second chance. Communities with a fire burning inside them to live the gospel so authentically that all who enter their presence will feel the love of Jesus shining through them. Communities truly living into the gospel imprint, leaving no one behind. But before Jesus can inspire those communities, he has his own dark night—wrestles with it, and comes out on the other side in brilliant, blinding glory.

Too often in our churches, we go to the mattresses over things that don't matter in the grand scheme. We go to the mattresses over music we don't like. We go to the mattresses over a minor change in worship practices. We go to the mattresses to exclude people who make us uncomfortable. We go to the mattresses to *be* right, while ignoring what Jesus, himself, told us *is* right.

If we're going to go to the mattresses, we should do that over something that matters. Fight the battle to best show the love of God to our community. Fight the battle to be more expansive in our ministry. Fight the battle to provide a true sanctuary to those who've been hurt by the church. Fight the battle to create a more just world for all of God's children.

Go to the mattresses when it matters over what actually matters. In just two weeks, we get to celebrate the most joyous moment on the Christian calendar: Easter Sunday. In two weeks, we will have visitors in this building and some of them may be in the midst of their own dark night. They will see us celebrate big that day, but the truth is, they should see us living every day like it's resurrection Sunday. We should live every single day as Jesus

called us to live, loving as Jesus called us to love, so that when someone walks through those doors in the midst of their dark night, there is no doubt in their minds that this is a community with the Divine spark burning. This is a church in which the Spirit of the still-speaking God is alive, vibrant, and active. This is a place whose ministry truly matters. This is a place where they, too, can make a difference. Amen.