

**FCCS May 26, 2019**  
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**“What will you do with yours?”**

In my experience there are two kinds of sermons. There are sermons where the goal is clear and the take home message is present from the beginning. The preacher’s job is to develop a pithy and intriguing narrative that fleshes out the obvious conclusion.

I call those “Connect the Dot” sermons. Remember Connect the Dot pictures from when you were a kid? You could see it was going to be a butterfly, or a dinosaur, but the fun was in seeing how the lines connected and the end of the process confirming you were right.

Everybody likes a Connect the Dot sermon, because you’re in on it from the start, there are no big surprises and that makes the ride a lot of good, safe fun. It would be awesome, at least for preachers, if every sermon could be a Connect the Dot sermon. If you’re lucky, about three out of four sermons fall into that category.

Then there’s the other kind of sermon. This is the kind keeps pastor’s up at night and gives us the shivers, because these sermons have a mind of their own. They’re risky, they may or may not be popular with the congregation and there are not dots to connect drawing toward the great reveal at the end. The process is fluid and wily. I call this the Etch a Sketch sermon.

When you start out on an Etch a Sketch you may have in mind that you are going to create a building, or a firetruck (always best to choose hard angles with an Etch a Sketch because rounded corners are nearly impossible). You may start out with an image in mind, but nine times out of ten you will settle for whatever you end up with. It may not look like much, but you will know how hard you worked, It isn’t your fault that buildings have windows and firetrucks have tires. In an Etch a Sketch sermon, the preacher may know what they’re getting at, but the congregation may not be able to see it, exactly.

Which kind of sermon do you think we are in for today?

That’s right, the Etch a Sketch kind.

There are two things on my mind this morning and it is hard to imagine two subjects about which I have less authority to speak and yet, feel compelled to address. The first is abortion. With Roe V. Wade in danger and states like Alabama making it more difficult, if not impossible, for a woman to decide what is best for her own body- it necessary to speak on that subject.

The second is veterans, obviously a topic much on the collective mind of our nation as it prepares to celebrate Memorial Day tomorrow. In most pulpits throughout America it is a given that a word might come from the pastor in support of those who dutifully fought and died in acts of war.

What makes these topics tricky for me, is that I do not have direct experience of either of them. While I do have a uterus, I have never been in the position of having to choose whether or not to have an abortion. And while members of my family were conscripted to military service, I personally, have never been drafted or volunteered to serve in the armed forces.

Scripture is the pastor's natural point of departure, so I'll start there and see where end up. I cannot promise it will look like a building or a firetruck, or even a sermon when I am through, that's the Etch a Sketch sermon.

**John 5:1-9** *Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.*

There are a number of perplexing, even disturbing images in this story, the first is of a gathering of invalids left unattended for years at a time. The vision that comes to my mind is from the fires in 2017. On the second day, I went to the Veterans Hall to distribute breathing masks. The Hall was the first location to which the Sonoma Developmental Center clients had been evacuated. They were moved a total of three times.

I was completely overwhelmed to have walked into a room filled with people in wheelchairs or hospital beds and on breathing and feedings tubes. People without the use of their arms or legs, some of whom were unable to speak, see or hear. What made the situation bearable, was the compassion and care being extended by the aids on hand to meet the needs of each fragile patient.

It is hard to imagine a society that would allow those with similar maladies to languish for years at a time- alone, without support of any kind. Hard to imagine and yet, drive past homeless encampments down by the creek and listen to stories of veterans for whom it took years to get the medical and psychological care they needed- and be reminded that we have not come so far as we would like to believe we have.

Scholars explain about the pools of Bethesda, that they were thought to be healing waters and at their highest potential after a storm, having been “stirred by the angel of the Lord”. Those first to reach the troubled waters were most likely to receive the greatest restoration, hence the rush on the waters that left the most critically handicapped individuals on the sidelines.

Here we might draw another parallel between history and the present, between those able to obtain healing services and those without access.

As a culture, we tend toward blaming the victim; berating people for not getting the help they need to combat any number of ills from obesity, to addiction, diabetes, to heart attacks, but are we doing enough in our nation about issues of accessibility?

Here perhaps is where the support of women’s health fits squarely into the equation; do all women have access to and support around contraception and family planning. Or is it just the most upwardly mobile who can get close enough to the healing waters to stand a chance. Will the others be punished for lack of access and education, or for pregnancies born of accident, ill timing, abuse or rape?

Jesus asks the man on the margins if he wishes to be healed. Scholars are critical of the man’s lack of zeal in responding to Jesus’ offer. Frankly, I am a little shocked by what seems to me an unnecessarily cruel line of inquiry. “Do you want to be made well?” The man has suffered for nearly four decades, it is little wonder his response is a litany of what is wrong.

We’ve all known, some of us have been, those people beaten down and overlooked, pushed aside and ignored. If you’ve been in that place long enough, it can be hard to trust that circumstances will ever get better.

Then, in a line reminiscent of Glinda the Good Witch telling Dorothy to click her heels together three times, Jesus tells the man to pick up his mat and walk as if it had been within his power to do so all along.

God helps those who help themselves it seems, but what about the others, the rest of the people unable to reach the healing waters, how can one help oneself if help is out of reach or if the kind of help one needs is illegal?

I have trouble speaking about the issue of abortion because there is a false dichotomy at play between pro-life and pro-choice. The pro-choice label makes it sound as if people who believe in a woman's right to choose what is right for her body are promoting abortion; encouraging people to rush willy-nilly into the procedure as if it were something fun like sex. In my experience, no one rushes fool heartily into an abortion, those are painful and difficult decisions that cannot be reduced to a bumper sticker. And if, God forbid, that is a decision that a woman has to make for whatever reason she deems credible- she is deserving of nothing but loving support.

I have trouble speaking about Memorial Day, and the attendant pomp and circumstance because I feel the message is confusing. The death of even a single person in the name of peace is a tragedy not cause for parades or a sale at JC Penny. When I remember the people in my family who died either in direct combat, or as a result of PTSD related suicide or cancer caused by Agent Orange, I do not feel celebratory. I feel grief and a redoubling of my commitment to work for peace and reconciliation.

As it happens, our text this morning is more about the scandalous nature of Jesus healing on the Sabbath than about the healing itself. It is about Jesus breaking Jewish Law, giving authorities all kinds of reasons to persecute him for acting as an equal to God.

In a very Godlike act Jesus, added another commandment- we heard about it last week- it introduced three words that changed the course of history, **“love one another.”** He doesn't say love one another everyday but Saturday, or when it complies with the appropriate restrictions, he says, “love one another.” It was those three words that lost him his life, it is those same three words that give us new life in him.

This day let us be reminded that loving one another means fighting for access, for the disabled, for the veteran, for the victim of sexual violence, for every woman whose body belongs to none other than herself, but whose reproductive system is often used as a pawn for political gain.

Let us be reminded that loving one another sometimes looks like grieving while others celebrate. It sometimes means offering healing while others stand by and watch, and sometimes it means taking up our mats and walking.

Remember that making windows and round wheels on an Etch a Sketch is not easy task, neither are those three little words, "love one another."

Now, Southern preachers have a third kind of sermon, called a long horn sermon. That means it has a point at one end a point on the other end and a whole lot of B---S--- in between.

I like to think of Sunday's sermon as part of a never- ending relay race; I've run my leg, it's your turn now.

Amen