

That Safe Place

A drama for two readers

James 5:13-18

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

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Remember in the film *The Sound of Music* how the children woke up one day and Maria was gone? Father, the respected Captain Von Trapp, weakly comforted the children by telling them that Maria was called back to the abbey. (She wasn't called, she fled in the night.)

"Who will be our new governess?" they ask.

"You won't need a governess anymore," their father tells them, for they are to have a new mother. He puts his hands on the shoulders of the icy Baroness; she smiles at them with her tiger-teeth. She is, he explains, to be his new wife.

The scene is high drama. The kids are dejected and disappointed. How could the Baroness take the place of their deceased mother? And, as importantly, who would take the place of their beloved Maria? Who would sing with them? Who would play with them? Who would be their confidant and friend? And why didn't she have the courtesy to say goodbye? Didn't Maria love them?

Yes, that was part of Maria's problem, of course. Maria *did* love the children. And she was falling in love with their Father. This would not do with the Baroness on the scene! Besides, a governess is not supposed to fall in love with her boss. Maria was confused and upset. She needed to get away. She went back to the abbey.

When the children showed up there the next day, a nun greeted them at the gate.

"We wish to see Maria!" they ask, but they are denied, for Maria is spending her days alone in contemplation and prayer. And remember the Mother Superior? She finally calls Maria out of her self-imposed, monastic solitary confinement and begins singing that "Climb Every Mountain" song; it's her way of telling Maria that you've got to face up to life's troubles.

Having found some courage and peace from Mother Superior, and from her solitary days of prayer, Maria stops running from her problems, goes back to the kids, and does all the things that make for a good movie with a happy ending.

Wasn't Maria lucky? When life got tough, she had a *safe place* in which to retreat. She had the abbey. And when she was feeling washed away by the swirl of confusing

emotions in her life, Maria had a guide in the Mother Superior. Maria also had the supportive nurture of her sisters in the convent.

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When our lives get tangled in difficulties, where do we turn? Where is *our* safe place? Who guides *us*? When we are terrified, confused, needing to get away, *where do we go*?

Jesus teaches us by his words and actions that our '*safe place*' is God, and, by God's grace, we connect to God by way of prayer. When we are in prayer we become aware of God's sustaining presence—just as Jesus must have felt.

When Jesus felt spent, he would go to God in prayer. When the crowds pushed too hard and asked too many questions for one mind to handle, and he felt as if he could no longer breathe, he found 'space' in prayer.

Consider these words from scripture:¹

Rachel: Jesus came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives. And the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, Jesus said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." Then Jesus withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done."

Then an angel from heaven appeared to Jesus and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.

When he got up from prayer, he came to his disciples and found them sleeping because of their grief. "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial."

While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them.

This is the Word of the Lord

Matt: Thanks be to God.

This is the familiar scene at the garden. It was after Jesus' last supper with his disciples and moments before his arrest. Jesus knew that his time had come. *If there is some other way, Father, let it be. But if not, I'm willing to go this way, because you are with me, and it's your will.*

Confusion? Terror? Anxiety? Where did Jesus go? Where did he flee in that dark night of testing? Jesus went to God.

Rachel: When he needed a place to go, he went to God in prayer. When he was terrified, confused and badly needing to clear his head, to get away, he went to God in prayer.

Matt: He wanted his disciples to learn about prayer. So he taught them.

Rachel: Love your enemies, Jesus said, and pray for those who persecute you. (Mt 5:43ff).

Matt: And when you pray don't make a big show of it. And don't heap up empty phrases.

Rachel: Jesus gave his disciples this prayer as a guide and the church has prayed it, and preached it, and expressed in every language imaginable, with dance, and in song. The church has been guided by it, comforted by it, and has paraphrased its meaning with other words. Pray like this, Jesus said:

Matt: Our Father who art in heaven . . . ²

Rachel: Our Father, beyond and deep within,³

M & R: Father . . . ⁴

Matt: hallowed be your name.

Rachel: Holy be your name, to us and among us.

M & R: May your name be taken seriously.

Matt: Thy kingdom come . . .

Rachel: Your powerful leadership come up within us, among us, and upon us.

M & R: May your movement spread.

Matt: Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Rachel: Your will be done by us today as in eternity.

Matt: Give us this day our daily bread.

Rachel: Sustaining bread grant us each day.

Matt: And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

Rachel: And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

M & R: And free us from our sins, even as we release everyone indebted to us.

Matt: And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Rachel: And don't let us get all tangled up.

(PAUSE)

M & R: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
forever. AMEN.

Rachel: Where do you go when you are confused and needing some space? Jesus
invites us to go to God in prayer.

Matt: James puts it this way: Are any among you suffering?

Rachel: They should pray.

Matt: Are any cheerful?

Rachel: They should sing songs of praise.

Matt: Are any among you sick?

Rachel: They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them,
anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

Matt: The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and
anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

M & R: Therefore . . .

Rachel: Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that
you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

Matt: When you are confused, and worried, and you feel like you have too many or
too few options, where do you turn?

Rachel: Jesus invites us to turn to God in prayer. Prayer puts us in touch with God's
power, and comfort, and peace.

Matt: "Hi. My name's Mike. I'm an alcoholic."

Rachel: "Hi. Mike."

Matt: It's the pretty standard introduction into Alcoholics Anonymous. You
introduce yourself: your name and an admission of your disease because
both your name and your disease are part of you.

Rachel: You are assigned a sponsor. Mike's sponsor is Harry. He's told if he ever

needs somebody to talk to one-on-one or in between meetings, he can call his sponsor. After 10 weeks of being sober and making meetings, he slips. He's at a bar, ready to buy a drink. He calls his sponsor.

Matt: He meets him in 11 minutes. They sit at a booth in the back, with a large order of fries between them. His sponsor asks if they can pray before they begin talking. It's the prayer their AA group opens its meetings with.

Rachel: Let's say it together, okay?

Matt: Okay.

R & M: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.⁵

Rachel: Amen.

Matt: Amen.

Rachel: There it is. Mike's feels it. A glimmer of that peace. A sense of a higher power stooping low to lift him up. An image of Jesus on the cross flashes across his mind. Then, an image of Jesus embracing the little children, followed by a sense that God wants to embrace him, that God is with them at that booth in that noisy bar, while Johnny Cash is singing on the juke box about love being ring of fire.⁶

Matt: Prayer is a powerful thing.

Rachel: It puts us in touch with our shepherd when we feel hopelessly lost.

Matt: She's gotten older. Husband has died. One kid is in Seattle. The other in New Haven

Rachel: I feel lost, swallowed up in this big house, insignificant. I was such a good mother. And now. Now they are gone, all of them. And that big car is getting so hard to drive, and at night I can hardly see a thing. And my *own* church is filling up with people I don't even know.

Matt: At night, despite two knee replacements, she kneels to pray, an eighty-year-old body on brand new, stainless steel knees.

Rachel: Dear God, be good to me; The sea is so wide, and my boat is so small.⁷

Matt: And she prays bits and pieces of remembered psalms . . .

Rachel: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . . O Lord, you have searched me and known me . . .

Matt: She rambles a bit. She remembers her Harold, dear man. She thinks upon her children and her children's children, and her great-grand children.

Mercy! could she be that old? Where did the years go? As she prays to God, she enters in to a mystic dialogue of sorts, and joy carries her beyond the ache of her crooked spine. "Come,"⁸ she says. "Come . . .

Rachel: Come, true light.

M & R: Come . . .

Rachel: Come life eternal.

M & R: Come . . .

Rachel: hidden mystery,

M & R: Come . . .

Rachel: treasure without a name. Come, reality beyond all words. Come, person beyond all understanding. Come, rejoicing without end.

Matt: And it's as if her prayer becomes a tangle of all the prayers she's ever uttered. As if her voice is being joined by a host of others, by her Sunday school class, by her friends, by Harold and all the others, living and dead, who have shared her journey.

Rachel: Come . . .

M & R: light that knows no evening.

Rachel: Come . . .

M & R: raising of the fallen, and resurrection of the dead.

Matt: Come . . .

M & R: alone to the alone.

Rachel: Come, for you continue always unmoved, yet at every instant you are wholly in movement.

Matt: You draw near to me, though I bow lowly, and yet you remain higher than the

heavens!

Rachel: Come, for your name fills my heart with longing and is ever on my lips, yet who you are and what your nature is, I cannot fully say or know.

Matt: Come, for you are yourself the desire that is within me.

M & R: Come, my breath and my life.

Rachel: Come, O God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, come! For you are the consolation of my humble soul. Come, my joy, my glory, my endless delight. 8

Matt: With such a prayer, is it any wonder that this dear woman, more often than not, sleeps so well at night? When she prays like this at night, she becomes aware of what she so easily forgets during the day time: she becomes aware that she lives and moves and has her being in God. And God will not forsake her. God will provide. And in God is her peace.

Rachel: When we are afraid, or confused, or tired to the bone, we don't need an abbey to escape to like Maria. We already have a safe place.

Matt: Jesus has shown our safe place to us.

Rachel: By God's grace, we get there by prayer.

Matt: Thanks be to God.

Rachel: Let us pray: Hear our prayer, O holy God. Receive our thanks. Steady our hearts. Use our lives to your purposes. And guide our steps. For we ask it in Christ's holy name and in the power of your Holy Spirit.

All: AMEN.

¹ from Luke 22:39-47a, NRSV.

² Traditional Lord's Prayer, Matthew six.

³ Dan Jungkuntz, director, Peninsula Pastoral Counselling Center, Newport News, Virginia. Unpublished.

⁴ Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospel.

⁵ Attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr.

⁶ Written by June Carter and Merle Kilgore; recorded by Johnny Cash on *Ring of Fire: The Best of Johnny Cash* (1963).

⁷ Breton fisherman's prayer, No. 422 in The Oxford Book of Prayer, George Appleton, gen. ed., Oxford University Press, New York: 1985.

⁸ This "come" prayer--a prayer of bidding--is adapted by me from Saint Symeon the New Theologian, No. 579 in The Oxford Book of Prayer, George Appleton, gen. ed., Oxford University Press, New York: 1985.