

the Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström
UCC
Epiphany 5C “Patty in the Margins”
2010

Irvine United Congregational Church,
February 7,

Isaiah 6:1-8
Gospel Reading: Luke 5:1-11

word count: 1,667

There are some books you can always remember reading in a special context. I saved Jack Kerouac's, "On the Road" for an adventure I took in my early twenties. I left for a couple of weeks with a backpack, and hitchhiked through Vermont while New York was still too steamy and hot to stay put. It was some thirty years ago when I bought a small lightweight orange tent and headed off into a rainy week in New England, where I learned the difference between the terms, "waterproof" and "water-resistant." Waterproof costs more. Water-resistant is what I bought.

After a few nights traveling around on my own in the rain, I looked up a young couple I met the year before. They put me up, and it was good to be warm, fed and in happy company. The next day, I got a lift into Brattleboro, and because I was on a limited budget, the best I could do was a night in the old Latchis Hotel, downtown.

It has since been renovated, but when I visited, it had slid into disrepair over the years since it was built in 1938. The lobby was sad, with old vinyl chairs and the only television in the hotel; always on, with no-one watching. There was an empty ballroom, paint peeling from its walls, just down the corridor that held an old candy machine with limited choices.

I headed up to my room, which looked out over the main doors of the hotel and the light from the old art-deco sign. A bare light bulb illuminated the hallway by the door. The window casement weights were broken, and it had to be propped open on a phone book to let the air in. There were two blue vinyl chairs and a double bed with an old chenille bedspread, though clearly the room was big enough to have once been furnished less spartanly. A standing fan circulated the humid, warm air.

In my small spiral notebook journal, I wrote, "Watching rain from my window. Constant and too heavy to walk around in. Brattleboro is a great old town—Estey Organ factory still stands, long wooden building now tilting sideways. City is a center for freethinkers. Tomorrow I will go to Common Ground (a free restaurant). Hotel looks like something from an old detective movie. Found Gideon's Bible—interesting story inside. Patty. 'Where am I?' she wrote in the margin."

The interesting story, to which I refer, is not the Bible itself, though my readings there were enhanced by what was added in the margins. I found the Gideon Bible in a drawer.

How many of you look for the Gideon Bible in a hotel room, whether you open it up and read it or not? This is a story about why you should at least open one when you come across it.

I was at a time in my life where I had questioned every aspect of my Christian faith and found it lacking. There was no room for me in this story anymore. What had been an active prayer life turned into an occasional check-in late at night with the God in whom I no longer believed, to rail against the implausibility of it all—the exclusion, the inability to parrot a simple doctrine and the "outsider-ness" that was caused as a result. Especially, it was an opportunity to complain about the smug certainty of so many of God's adherents. What kind of a God would have *those* kinds of followers? Of course, after a while I realized that it was impossible to be in conversation with a deity in whom I did not believe, and I finally came to know that I was connected in belief after all, but that my faith was in a Creative Force much larger and less cardboard than the one I had first become acquainted with. God did not grow. I did.

Many people come to the same kinds of conclusions. Who is the God YOU no longer believe in? Chances are, I don't believe in that one, either. Is it possible that we are swept up in a net of something that holds all of Creation as one large catch, without regard to differences?

And, here in a bleak hotel room I met Patty in the margins of tissue-thin pages. Patty, who wrote in the front of the Gideon Bible, "God Does Not Exist" below the printed words, "The Holy Bible," and probably it was the same Patty who later crossed out the word, "not" in decisive, heavy pencil, and underlined the word, "does." "God Does --- Exist," it proclaimed, after coming to a marred, tortured, yet finally definitive conclusion.

Inside, she named herself, writing, "Patty," in the margins. After that, I found her notes from time to time in the pages she visited. She wrote, "This makes me sad: Patty," on one page. On another, she wrote, "Gives hope: Patty." "Where am I? Questioned Patty-in-the-margins, on another page.

Wherever Patty wrote something in the margins, I read all of the chapters around it. Why did this make Patty sad? What was the story saying to me?

Conversely, whoever Patty was, where she wrote, "Gives hope," I looked for the good news she found there with the same sense of urgency.

"Where am I in this story: Patty?" What would make someone like Patty-in-the-margins be uplifted; what made her believe she was included? Do any of you ever wonder how you fit into this story—and how because of something you believe about yourself, you cannot claim a spot on pages filled with scripture anywhere but shuffled off in some margin? I read wherever Patty-in-the-margins made notations, and soon I was off on my own reading and having some of the same thoughts she did—"Where was I: Paul."

It was an old-fashioned, bare-light bulb, gumshoe detective story in a hotel that was built for one. I got up the next morning to check out and go on to the next adventure.

Jack Kerouac, stuffed in my backpack, kept me with him on the road to self-discovery, writing,

"I woke up as the sun was reddening; and that was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn't know who I was — I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I'd never seen, hearing the hiss of steam outside, and the creak of the old wood of the hotel, and footsteps upstairs, and all the sad sounds, and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn't know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds."

On the Road, Part 1, Ch. 3

If Kerouac's story was a search for self-discovery, Patty-in-the-margin's was about wanting to be found, to know that there is somewhere where you belong—that you are swept up with the rest of Creation into the arms of what we call "holy." Hers was a story about wanting to be embraced from the margins, whatever that means to you, to find freedom in claiming your place in creation.

Since then, I try to remember to look at the Gideon Bible when I stay in a hotel. I like to see it through the eyes of someone who might boldly declare their questions in red pen; their great faith or sudden disillusionment. For some, it is an object of anger, and harsh words are scrawled by those who feel that their names have no place but written in the margins.

Others use it as an outlet for public forgiveness. I found a note folded inside a Gideon Bible from a man asked anyone who found his message to pray for him for his cheating. He listed information about his infidelity as if he was seated in a confessional— giving the first names of women with whom he had been, and the number of times each. It was as if all of us who met him through that folded piece of paper in the Bible were the Priests of Room 337, whose continued job it was to either pray for the forgiveness of his sins, or let him off the hook.

There are also people who leave \$20 bills folded in the Bible for the next guest to find as a reward for looking for inspiration there. (That'll get you to open a Gideon Bible...)

Today's story is one about being discovered and lifted up in the same catch with all Creation. It is a tale of extravagant welcome. In Luke, Jesus tells his disciples to drop their nets, and when they lift them up, they are full of fish of every kind. Jesus tells them that from now on, they will lift up those, who need to find what that welcome truly means. He never talks about which ones to throw back because they are too this or that.

How hard it is to imagine a life where you cannot find the freedom to be what you were called to be. Some people believe that they are undeserving, while others are marginalized and cannot claim full equality, for any number of reasons.

Isaiah believed that he was not worthy, crying, "Woe is me, I am lost." In his encounter with the divine, he realized that he did have a calling after all, and he said, "Here am I; send me!"

You belong. In today's sharing of the water of baptism, in the partaking of the bread and the cup, reclaim what it means to be a part of the whole in this community. It is yours to claim.

Sacraments of water and wine; symbols of the presence of the Spirit, of forgiveness and of being joined in community. Here, now, bring the desire to be fed and nourished spiritually—to become a part of something larger—to feel free and connected in a spiritual net that lifts us so that we might all be one. AMEN.

Scriptures for Sunday, February 7, 2010

Isaiah 6:1-8

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. 2 Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. 3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." 4 The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 5 And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" 6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7 The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Luke 5:1-11

1 Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, 2 he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. 4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." 5 Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." 6 When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. 7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. 8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; 10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners

with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” 11 When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.