

Sometimes it is the smallest of things that can connect us to God, especially in overwhelming times. A parishioner reminded me of this truth about three years ago. Lest we get too nostalgic about pre-pandemic days, at the time much of America was offended and filling social media with their anger over the news of how people trying to immigrate into the country were being treated. At the border of Mexico families were being separated: couples from one other, children from parents, and put into holding cells without the dignity of basic hygiene necessities. At the time, many people felt anger because they knew they were powerless to help.

Meanwhile, here at Church of the Good Shepherd we were starting our coffee shop ministry with a soft open in June during Ohio University's new student orientation. While I was at the coffee shop trying to figure out what our ministry would look like, a parishioner came in to tell me she needed help. When I asked her what was going on, she didn't describe the challenging situation she was dealing with. She didn't tell me what had happened. She told me the size of her problem.

"It's this big," she said, indicating something quite small. "What is it?" I asked. She told me it was a kitten, a very young kitten her neighbors had found in their garage. They brought the kitten to our parishioner who of course gave it something to eat and drink, and that is when she noticed something was wrong with the little kitten. A trip to the vet revealed the kitten had a broken jaw and despite only being five weeks old, needed surgery.

Of course, I offered to help as best I could. I happened to have experience taking care of a cat with a broken jaw. Several years ago, my cat who was sixteen at the time survived being hit by a car, but his jaw was broken in three places and required multiple surgeries. With care, he healed and lived another four years. I used this experience to say there was a lot of hope for the little kitten and assured the parishioner she was doing the right thing.

A few days later the parishioner called me while I was working on a sermon to tell me the kitten had made it through the surgery and was ready to be discharged from the vet. She asked if I would pick up the kitten because she couldn't as she was overseeing the church's annual flea market. And even though no class in seminary covers this sort of pastoral situation, of course I did. The little black kitten was waiting on the counter when I walked into the vet's office. As soon as she saw me, she reached her tiny paw through the opening in the cat carrier door, and I knew then I was no longer helping a parishioner. I was all in

loving and caring for a little life in need of love as much if not more than the medicine the vet gave me.

That's how Harriet came to be part of our family. If you follow me on Facebook or Instagram, you undoubtedly have seen pictures of her. Harriet did require a great deal of care for several months. She had a wire in her jaw and part it stuck out of her chin. We had to give her medicine twice daily, and she was quite lively which made it a two-person job. Then we discovered she had lice and fleas and worms, all which had to be treated. And we did. We also let her sleep on our bed. And our cats and dog looked after her, snuggled with her, and made her feel welcome. Harriet felt so welcome when the parishioner came to visit her to see how she was doing, Harriet hid and wouldn't come out. That was Harriet's way of declaring she is home.

But that is not the end of the story. When I had both my hips replaced, Harriet stayed with me throughout those first weeks of recovery when I didn't feel well. She never left my side. Now she is with me when I do exercises as I work to slowly return to full mobility. Harriet gives as good as she got. And she taught me that even when there are so many things going on that upset or discourage me, when it feels like I am powerless to effect change, there is still plenty I or anyone of us can do, I can love what is in front of me. Will it change the world? Well, in Harriet's case, it changed her world. And maybe the parishioner's too. Harriet helped me gain perspective when I needed it.

By now I'm sure you are wondering what Harriet has to do with today's Gospel. At first glance, perhaps it is difficult to see, but it's there if we look at how Jesus responded to losing his big crowd of disciples. Remember, these are the folks who numbered in the thousands who sought Jesus and Jesus fed with a mere two loaves of bread and five fish and then tried to give him political authority by making him their king. Jesus responded by running away to a quiet place then later walking on water to the other side of the lake, but the crowd of eager disciples followed him and caught up with him. Over the past few weeks, we've heard the teaching he gave this persistent group that supposedly still numbered in the thousands. The teaching of who he is. Jesus is not a celebrity, he is not a military general or a political ruler, he is not a miracle man, he is the true bread, the giver of life, not biological life, the life of God's kingdom here on earth, the life that heals and restores all people to relationship with God.

This is where the Gospel picks up the narrative today. When the thousands of people responded to Jesus' teaching by being offended. I know the text says the teaching was too difficult to accept, but the word translated as difficult doesn't imply the people were not intelligent enough to understand. It wasn't an issue of cognition. The truth or lesson was offensive. This is not the teaching of

their religious leaders or parents. This is not what they wanted to hear. And in response, they did something many modern readers might identify as canceling Jesus by leaving.

Cancel culture is a bit controversial these days because it has been coopted to mean rejecting anything someone finds offensive. But originally, the practice came from the black and LGBTQ+ communities. When celebrities or politicians who had promised to promote the rights of these minorities, who voted for them or gave them celebrity by following them, failed to do so, these communities publicly withdrew their support. It was a way of holding the powerful accountable by reminding them where their power came from. It seems the cooped version fits today's Gospel as the thousands of people had come to Jesus looking for hope, got to be part of a miracle feeding, and then used their numbers to try and push Jesus to be the kind of savior they wanted. Just by being so many in number, they had given Jesus power to start his own mega church, his own political party, his own army to fight the oppressive forces of Rome. All Jesus had to do was lead them and please them. But that isn't who Jesus is or why he came. Jesus didn't come to fight Rome. Jesus came to heal, to restore, to love as God loves us and invite us to love God back and share life with God. But they didn't hear the words of eternal life.

In disgust that Jesus wouldn't do what they wanted, the huge number of people withdrew their support and left. And Jesus went from having thousands of disciples to a few more than a dozen who claimed to stay with him because they have no other options. This could be a statement of strong faith or exasperation; they really don't know where else to go. Either way, the twelve couldn't follow Jesus all the way to the cross and resurrection. They all left when it got too difficult or scary or dangerous. Only one of Jesus' followers stayed with him through his trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. By Easter morning Jesus only had one follower left. Mary Magdalene. At least, that is how John's Gospel tells it.

Those who are familiar with her remember that Mary was someone Jesus had healed from illness so severe it was described as demonic and thus restored her to life, not just a healthy biological and emotional life, but life where she was restored to participate in family, friends, religion, and society. And Mary chose to live that life by following Jesus, loving him as he loved her, and she loved him to the end and into the new beginning. The Risen Jesus didn't despair there was only one person left on Easter morning. He gave that person the task to tell others the good news he is risen. And it is from this one follower that the good news of Jesus' resurrection has spread all over the world. Because the truth is Jesus is the one with the words of eternal life, of God's love incarnate here on

earth, loving, healing, and restoring us, a love that is even more powerful than death, and by sharing this news Mary Magdalene ensured we all hear this good news today. I am not talking about the romantic or sexual love that too often gets mistakenly interpreted in her story. It is a love much more like the love we gave Harriet and Harriet gives us.

It is a love that can seem small in the face of so much of the world's sorrows, injustices, pains, losses, and deep griefs. A world coming to terms with a pandemic that won't go away no matter how hard we try to pretend or will it away. A world watching old injustices on the other side of the world resurface with ease, causing fear and anger and a tragic sense of powerlessness. A world watching helplessly as a country loses more lives after another earthquake and rain falls in Greenland for the first time in recorded history making us fear we'll never have a healthy planet. You don't need me to go on, even though I could. Sometimes it can get overwhelming, sometimes it might feel like we can't take or process any more bad news. It's too difficult to accept.

Sometimes we might identify with that crowd who canceled Jesus when he didn't wave a magic wand and fix all the problems of the world and instead talked on and on about being the stuff of life. Jesus isn't going to fix the world like we want him to. Instead, Jesus does something better. He loves us, feeds us the love of God, so that we can love God back and love our neighbors, whether they are a little kitten or the students back on the OU campus and public schools, the faculty and teachers who may be weary of heading into another school year that has to adapt to uncertainties of the pandemic. Or the parents of students who may have concerns. Or community members, business leaders, everyone who is feeling the complexities of this day before classes start. Sure, there is a lot we can't do anything about, as much as we might want to.

But the lesson Harriet teaches us is we can focus on what we can do and love our way through it all. We made what I hope will become an interactive sign to put in front of our church for the first day of classes. I invite you all to write on the sign a message, a prayer, or blessing to our OU neighbors to read as they pass by. It's a small way we can show we are here, we love them. Not that we want to make money off them, or exploit them, just that we see them as our neighbors. Tomorrow, I and anyone who wants to join me, will be on the porch and greet passersby and invite them to write their thoughts or prayers or hopes on the sign. It's a way we can hold each other and love each other in this unique time. It may not be something everyone sees or participates in, but it might be a big deal for someone who needs it. For such people, it might just be the stuff of eternal life that they will share with others. And it is one thing we can do to love our neighbors as God loves us.