

## “The Creek don’t rise”

A Sermon delivered at By Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister  
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You all know the saying right? “Everything will be ok... God willing... (*and the Creek don’t rise.*)” I used to think that was just a cute, southern, Christian saying about the rising water getting in the way of God’s plan, although it never quite made sense to me. The poor grammar just made me believe it was a saying native to Oklahoma, or that originated in Alabama or Arkansas. How many of you know what that phrase actually means? Not many actually do. That saying, as you probably *do* know, comes from a letter written from then U.S. ambassador to the Creek Nation, Benjamin Hawkins, whom Marlin read about earlier.

Hawkins was college-educated and well-written. He would likely not have made the grammatical error (the creek don’t rise.) So the capitalization of Creek is really the only way this saying would make sense. Benjamin Hawkins was writing to the President of the United States when he said that he would return to our Nation's Capital, “God Willing and the Creek Don’t rise.” which, of course, had nothing to do with a stream overflowing its banks. Truth, once again, is all about context. You see, if the Creek Nation “rose,” Hawkins would have to remain with them to try to keep the peace. The phrase really suggests that the Creek Nation is violent and war mongering, an assumption made by the U.S. about most native peoples. The Creek people were forcibly evicted from their homeland following the Treaty of Indian Springs in 1825 and historically, they did indeed violently protect what they believed was theirs.

Benjamin Hawkins did do a lot of good in trying to bridge the gap between the U.S. government and the Creek Nation. He learned their language, he negotiated for them in English with their needs in mind, and he brought them methods of building and ways of life they did not know. But, as we can decipher from the reading from Creek history, written over 200 years ago, he and others like him were *trying* to do good. They had very good intentions, but they made some very obvious assumptions that were not so helpful, and are now even painful to hear. Assumptions about what is right, what is normal, and what is civilized. Because we have seen the outcome of these negotiations some 200 years later, we know that the results were particularly one-sided. The U.S. very openly tried to dissolve the Creek Nation’s culture and their government.

So although this interpretation of the Creek people being particularly violent may have appeared to be factual to Benjamin Hawkins, it is an historical relic. It is an artifact of another

time that most people unknowingly perpetuate, when they say “God willing and the Creek don’t rise.” And for me it feels particularly icky to know that. It feels terrible to know that I have participated in maintaining a racist or ethnic stereotype. If I said this phrase in the presence of someone who was Creek, I might even feel worse.

This morning though, I am less interested in whether or not we have a mile long list of phrases that we know we cannot say for fear of offending someone. This morning I am more interested in what happens when we are *made aware* that we have unintentionally offended someone? Do we blame our ignorance? Or their sensitivity? Do we own our mistake? Do we say some things in private and others in public? Does our awareness prevent us from wanting to be in relationships?

I want to tell you a very difficult story about someone among us, a member of this church who agreed that I could tell her story for the benefit of the teaching point. Someone who came face to face on a personal level with her own covered racism and assumptions. This person is educated, spiritual, and considers herself open to new experiences. She grew up in the south, comes to church regularly, has donated her money to many worthy causes. She considers herself very open minded and tears up when she hears Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. And she is pretty savvy when it comes to understanding the dynamics of power and influence. For the sake of this story, it is important for you to know that she is white.

Several years ago, when she was working for a company that required her to do a lot of traveling to small towns in Kentucky, she would spend weeks at a time at the same hotel. She got to know the hotel staff in this small town pretty well. On one particular trip, she informed the person at the desk that while she was there for the week, there was no need for them to change her sheets everyday, no need to waste the water, or the energy, or the soap. One morning, as she was exiting her room and about to step on the elevator, she saw a woman leaving a room down the hall and coming toward her. She assumed that this woman was cleaning the rooms on this floor. So, as she got on the elevator, she said something like “Don’t worry about cleaning my room... I’m good.” As the words left her lips she realized her mistake. This woman was not in a hotel uniform. She was not wielding a cleaning cart. She was simply African American. The hotel guest furiously said “I am not a maid!” Our member said, “I am so sorry.” But the damage was done. It was as though time had stopped and then reverted. Hundreds of years of progress had been stripped away by a single assumption.

The elevator doors shut and our member was mortified, ashamed, and had no idea what to do next. The event consumed her all day long and when she returned home that evening she

knew that she had to apologize again. She knew that she had to do something to let the woman know that she wasn't "that way." She wanted to tell the woman that she had worked hard to "not be that way" and to let the woman know that she would work harder than ever to prevent it from happening again. She confessed to people she knew all day and then asked what they thought she should do. Most told her to forget it. They said they knew her intentions were good, it was a mistake, and that there was nothing she could do to change what had happened. They believed it would only make it worse to try to apologize. She just could not leave it alone, she had to respond.

Back at the hotel, this congregant tried to get the woman's room number from the all white hotel staff. It was a small Kentucky town. The Hotel desk informed our member that the woman had checked out. She told the clerk the story. She told the clerk that she had to do something to make it right, and the clerk, trying to help our member, gave her the woman's home address (something that would likely never have happened had our member been Black.) When this congregant looked at the address, she was stunned. The woman lived in Tulsa on the other side of town. That night our member sent the woman a letter. The letter was brief and in it the congregant admitted that this would have never happened if the woman had not been black. Our member owned her racism and said how ashamed she was. She conveyed how disappointed she was in herself, believing that she was better than that. She let the woman know that she was expecting nothing in return, but just wanted to own what had happened.

Several days later, a letter came for our member. The woman wrote that she had been in Kentucky to bury her brother. She was grateful our member had taken the time to write and admit that she was wrong. She had never received such an honest ownership of racism. In the letter the woman assumed that our member must be a Christian to have owned up to such an error. The woman explicitly forgave this congregant in the letter. Although it was clear to our member that she certainly didn't have to. This woman did not owe our member forgiveness; she really didn't even owe her a response. It was an act of mercy.

Bumping into each other in this way causes so much damage. It is when people meet category to category, instead of face to face. And yet we need each other. Because these two people risked opening their hearts to one another, beyond their uncomfortable, initial contact they both walked away changed, with a bridge, instead of a creek between them.

We are always in the process of becoming. No one lives fixed in time unchanged. As Unitarians we believe that the revelation of God is not sealed. It is open and available for us to experience in the moment right now. It is not fixed in a creed or static and unchanging. So, why

should we encounter one another as static, *only* this way or that way when every one of us is always subject to time and influence?

We are all in the process of becoming. Learning more about ourselves as we encounter one another. Though we may not see the promised land, we can live our lives well trying to arrive as close as we can. If the revelation of God is ever unfolding in our lives, than we too, must be prepared to unfold with it. We must risk being open to be influenced by one another in our differences. Step outside of how we usually are, how we have been, and risk being vulnerable with one another. We must risk assuming the good intentions of others overall for they too are children of God. We must risk meeting them in the moment person to person for that is when real contact is made, when *people* meet soul to soul, when the divine in me meets the divine in you. When categories and culture and expectation fade away real contact is made. When we are *Christian* in the true sense of the word for *that*, I believe is the kind of radical message Jesus was suggesting.

I want to retell the Pharisee and the tax collector parable that Marlin read to you this morning, in a way that might make it as radical as it likely was likely heard in Jesus' time. (This is adapted from a version from William Barclay)

*Two women came to All Souls in the middle of the week. One was a Religious Education teacher who came by to pick up her curriculum. The other a thirty year old woman, addicted to cocaine, who dealt drugs to support her habit. The addict just wanted to use the bathroom as she wandered by our church on her way from Monte Casino where she had just sold Oxycontin to two eighth graders. In the church, on her way to the bathroom, she noticed the sanctuary door was open and she stepped in.*

*It was a coincidence that both women came into our church at the same time. They couldn't help noticing one another and their eyes met briefly as they moved apart in the sanctuary. The teacher took a seat near the front and opened the hymnal looking for a reading of inspiration to ground her. She read with concentration and then sat quietly. Her eyes lifted to the chancel window. Her heart filled with thanksgiving as she breathed this prayer,*

*"O God, I am [so] grateful that I have the inner resources to be a helper. I am glad that I can be of service to you-to be in church each Sunday, teach my class, and contribute financially to the needs of the church. Thank you God for not making me a drug dealer or a prostitute. Thank you, God, for my strong faith which helps me deal with the difficult moral issues that surround me and my family every day. Amen."*

*The young woman stood at the back of sanctuary and leaned against wall. She slouched over and squeezed her big canvas handbag to her chest. Tears streamed down her face, as she looked at the carpet near her feet. And her whole body shook as she prayed, "O God, I'm soo sorry, that I am so screwed up."*

Can you imagine Jesus saying, "I tell you, this drug dealer went to her home justified rather than the teacher?"

You may have noticed that Jesus doesn't always follow the rules of logic. The first will be last, the sorrowful will be happy, the humble exhaled, but he always follows his heart, one big enough even to include his enemies. "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

What this story tells us is that life is not about being a GOOD Christian. It is not about being a GOOD anything. It is about showing up with our hearts open. It is about our need for humility, the need for EVERYONE to recognize that they make mistakes. That even with the best of intentions, we will err. For we are part of a system that errs, a culture that is in error. It is a parable that reminds us that even if it appears that some people have figured out this morality thing better than others EVERYONE still needs humility. Inside of each of us is a Pharisee and a tax collector, a Religious Education teacher and a drug addict. We all have the potential for every sin. When we remember that, we walk humbly before God, hearts and minds open.

We will bump up against each other and sometimes it will be painful, sometimes it will be gentle and loving, and sometimes it will feel like a train wreck. What is church about if it is not about the transformative power of God revealing Herself in our lives, if it is not about making meaningful contact with another? What is church about if we are not learning about justice and mercy, our capacity to love, and our capacity to embrace, if we are not learning more about ourselves, if we are not awakened to the idea that we are all becoming? We are all brothers and sisters on this path to becoming. Let us walk together in love. In order to do so we must make contact with one another, heart to heart and soul to soul. So as Marlin said last week, you might want to bring a hard hat to church or you might get a bump on your head, or your heart!

I want to tell you one last story that might surprise you. There is a knot on the back of my head that protrudes at the base of my skull. I used to imagine that I had caused it, some old wound that never went away. In seminary, I would often joke that it was a welt formed when I was hit over the head with what I called the "Holy Two by Four." (You know, when God or Life smacks you upside the head with the same lesson that you thought you had already learned over and over. That might leave a knot, right?) Well actually four generations back, on my father's side my great, great, great, grandfather married a Creek woman and that is why I have this bump

on my head. It is called a Creek knot. Almost all Creek people have this knot on the back of their head. [Go ahead feel the back of your head, I know you are wondering]

My great, great, great, grandmother's name was Mahala. And she is one of the reasons why I walk on God's creation this day. For her, I am thankful. I think about her when I notice that spot on my head. What was she like? What were her struggles? Whom did she love? Her brown skin has been lost in what has become my gene soup but her life and the Creek culture is part of who I am. It is connected to my history.

I have been learning a lot about their history. As I have been researching my heritage what I have discovered is that *you all* also have a connection to the Creek people that you may not know about. How many of you know about Chief Tukabachee? Chief Tukabachee was forced from his home in Alabama and survived the trail of tears in 1835 to arrive at Oklahoma Indiana territory where he was given an allotment of land of nearly 120 acres. The land was situated between 21<sup>st</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> from Peoria to the Arkansas River.

Tuckabachee was a soldier who fought in the Mexican American War and in the American Civil war for the North. It was unusual for the time, for a Native American to support the US in the way. He was a Mikko, or a medicine man, a fellow minister of sorts. Tuckabachee lived to be 95 years old, only speaking his native tongue, and outliving several wives and all of his children. This land, including the land we sit on right now... was divided in the early 1900's and the property that contains All Souls today was held up in probate court until we acquired it in the 1950's. This corner of the allotment where the church is now, was where Tuckabachee had a cabin. As a matter of fact the cabin was right about where the stage is in Emerson Hall. According to our Minister Emeritus Rev. Dr. John Wolf, the basement dug for the cabin is still below that stage. You can find Tuckabachee's grave in Oaklawn cemetery, down the street on 11<sup>th</sup> and Peoria

So the Creek *are* among us. We are residing on their former land. Their blood mixes with some of our own, The Pharisees and the Tax Collectors *are also are among us*, as well as the pious and the addicted. We are all becoming. We need one another. And what we are called to do is to see one another through this lens of becoming, this holy lens of Love that assumes good intentions and stays open to the dialogue, open to our own mistakes, open to be changed. We are all called to see through a lens that reminds us that we too are always *in discovery* about who we are.

God willing, when things are difficult, doors will open that we did not know were there. If we come with eyes to see, God willing, we will be shown mercy by one another when we err.

God willing, when the waters are rising around us, when times are difficult and mistakes are made, we will throw one another a lifeline of mercy deep from within our own humility. God willing, we will come away from contact with one another *becoming*, feeling as though we have touched a holy place in ourselves and seen the holy in one another. For it is *then* when we are connected to God. May we carry with us this holy lens of becoming and from it know that God is among us, among All SOULS guiding our feet, holding our hand, and touching our heart.

Amen