**Sermon "Exceptional Cases"**

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**Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD**

**11/1/2026**

**Intro: exceptional cases are annoying**

Back in my elementary school days, we had a unit on Greek and Roman mythology. Once a week we would walk, single-file, down the hall to the library, sit ourselves down "three point landing" style, and listen in rapt attention as our teacher read aloud these ancient tales, suitably presented for children. It was my first exposure to the heroes: Hercules, Perseus, Theseus, Jason; the gods: Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Athena; and a host of villains, monsters and other characters, savory and unsavory. I loved it, and I voraciously read my way through the relevant shelves.

When we heard the story of the great warrior Achilles, it started something like this: Achilles was born of the sea nymph Thetis and the mortal Peleus. When he was a baby, his mother immersed him in the river Styx to make him invulnerable, but because she held him by one foot as she dipped him, that foot did not get wet, and so that part of him was vulnerable.

And right then I remember feeling somewhat annoyed. Why didn't Thetis change her grip to the other foot? Or why didn't she flip him rightside up and dip the other foot? Heck, why didn't she just dip them both! I mean, if you happen to know that dipping someone into the river Styx will make them invulnerable, then surely you know you gotta cover the whole body – it's not rocket science.

And then during the Trojan War, because he is a sourpuss, because he is not careful, because some of the gods are miffed at him, and because his dang foot didn't get dipped in the River Styx, Achilles dies. He loses! Not like the other heroes, they fearlessly faced their foes, they always did the right thing, and because they always had the gods on and at their sides, they always triumphed. Achilles, your myth is DUMB!

So thought my younger self, circa 1977. I thought that *surely* people are smarter and wiser than Thetis was; *surely* people are not so careless, and *surely* such exceptional cases are not that important…

But as I've aged, I've found that I am more like Thetis than I would like to admit, and I certainly have more empathy for her. I often think of Achilles when I do chores around the

house.  When washing a frying pan, I often don't wash the handle. When I mow the lawn, I often "kick the can" on the trimming by the fences and trees. And many are the places in our house that rarely, if ever, see the business end of the feather duster. I've come to realize that it is just not that easy to cover all the exceptional cases – and it may not even be possible.

**The Bible is almost all exceptions**

I have also learned that exceptional cases and their stories are "a thing" with us humanfolk, and they turn up all over the place. For instance, religion.

I usually use the Bible as a source in my sermons, not because I believe it to be a "perfect source of God's word and hence all truth", and not because I am particularly Christian, but rather I use it because it jibes with Channing's vision, and because, despite growing up in a secular household, I have learnt many of its stories and established a kind of rapport with it. Frankly, it has a lot of good material, and I can always find something relevant to my thoughts.

And so while the origins of and ideas for this sermon were not at all related to or inspired by scripture, I was not at all surprised to find that the Bible is chock-full of exceptional cases. To wit:

A virgin birth – that's something you don't see every day!

A teenager armed with a sling defeats an armor-covered giant wielding a spear in combat.

A great sea is parted. And unparted.

People are raised from the dead.

And, from our reading this morning, back in the early days of Genesis, hundreds of years before Moses and the Ten Commandments, Noah and his progeny were just and lived right in a time of chaos and wickedness. And so, God spares a single family before wiping the slate clean. I find it interesting, as a thought experiment, that if one buys into this part of the biblical account of creation, then we are, all of us, descendents of an exceptional case: Noah and his unnamed wife, the last good folk standing before the great flood.

Now the skeptic and scientist in me say "pfff. It's all just stories." My kingdom for a nail is a story, myths like Achilles are stories, and, for some, all that stuff from the Bible: the miracles, Noah, the flood, they are just stories, too. They are made up! They are not real exceptional cases. Do we really have anything to learn from them?

I have two responses,

First, there are plenty of real exceptional cases, with real and sometimes amazing, and sometimes devastating consequences. In the realm of engineering, bridges have collapsed, airplanes have crashed, spacecraft have exploded.

Second, stories of exceptional cases, be they made up or not – especially stories of disaster or mayhem, loom large in our psyches. It's part of how we are wired, and we make decisions based on these stories.

Evolutionarily, the fear of a terrible happening has often kept us alive. But even in Biblical times, and especially these days, more often than not, this fear is not useful. We hear about so many terrible things, and yet most of them are exceedingly rare. Sun Tzu, in The Art of War, writes "Kill one, scare ten thousand."

Not only do we tend to overestimate the probability of disaster, we also tend to underestimate more real dangers because we do not have sensationalistic stories to warn us. Drowning is the leading cause of death of children from ages 1 to 4. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause for children aged 5-22, and second leading for ages 23-67.

And then sometimes, as Richard Feynman pointed out in his report on the Challenger Space shuttle disaster, we want to decide what the risks are in service of our own agendas, and in spite of reality.

And so we must be careful of what stories we let live in our souls. We must be curators of our stories. Though I haven't focused on them today, there are stories of exceptional cases that are good for our souls; and one of the reasons I come to church is to hear such stories. But if we are careless, if we plug into the 24-hour news cycle, if we value our desired truth over actual truth, we are headed for all kinds of trouble.

Exceptional cases and their stories are tricky things. Wouldn't it be better and easier if we just followed "the rules"?

**We are bad at rules**

Well, the bible is filled with stories about exceptional cases, but it also is filled with rules. And yet, with a few notable exceptions, the rules in the Bible have not really made it into its "pop culture". God, through Moses, "lays down the law" in the book of Leviticus, and it is all about rules for rituals, morals, laws, etc., etc., etc., and I don't really know a darn thing about it.

Not only are we driven by stories, we are bad at rules. I am hesitant to tell you what I am about to say, because I pride myself on having a good memory, and also because I would be in deep doo doo for my next bit in pretty much any non UU pulpit. But here we go.

To test my thesis that we are bad at rules, I gave myself a little quiz: write down the ten commandments. How did I do? Anyone want to guess? [possibly engage congregation]. Five. Not ten, but five. [hold up hand] One hand's worth. Fifty percent. Grade: F.

In my defense I have never really committed myself to committing the commandments to memory. My point is this – rules are hard. They are boring. They are unmemorable. And if remembering 10 is hard, how about 613, the number of commandments in the Torah?

And yet, rules are good for society, and there are real consequences for ignoring natural rules, like the laws of physics.

So, if there's not a lot of room in our heads for rules, which few are worth putting in there?

**Jesus**

Jesus, in addition to understanding the power of story and exceptional cases, also had good answers to this question. In Matthew 22:37-40, when asked "Which commandment is the greatest?",

37 Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'

38 This is the first and greatest commandment.

39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

And also in Matthew 7:12:

12 So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets

So, that's three things: love God, love your neighbor, and the so-called "Golden Rule". Actually, it is only two things, as "Love Your Neighbor" and the "Golden Rule" are really two variants of the same message, and variants of that message are found in almost all the world religions. One of my favorite variants, sometimes called "The Silver Rule", attributed to Rabbi Hillel, goes like this, "What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary; go and learn it."

But there's a little hitch in The Golden Rule – an exceptional case. What does "love your neighbor as yourself" mean if you hate yourself?

And so perhaps this is the reason that Jesus says that to love God is the greatest commandment. For, to love God, at least for me, means to love the life I have been given, to

love myself. It also means to love the good, my neighbor, and the beauty of nature; and it means to seek out and accept what is true, not what I want to be true–

be it exceptional or not.

Amen.