

“The Sick Are Always With Us”
Brentwood First Presbyterian Church
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The First Sunday in Lent
February 25, 2007
(James 5:13-16, Luke 4:16-21)
Luke 6:6-11

Scene 1 Jesus silences the critics

There are always at least three points of view, aren't there? The view of those who act, those who are acted upon, and those who criticize. The play goers, the actors, and the newspaper critics. The home town football team, the visiting team, and the Monday morning quarterbacks. The gladiators, the wild animals, and the person who gives the thumbs up or the thumbs down. There are always at least three points of view.

There are also three points of view in today's Gospel story: Jesus, the man with the crippled hand, and the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees are the religious authorities of 2000 years ago. The religious authorities who see in the man with the crippled hand an opportunity to put Jesus in a no-win situation. Put Jesus in his place. If Jesus heals the man, they accuse him of violating Levitical law. If Jesus refuses to heal the man, he invalidates his mission statement.

Jesus decides to make a public statement. This is yet another teaching moment. He asks, “Which takes precedence, the duty of Sabbath rest, or the duty to feed the hungry and heal the sick?” In other words, can the love of God be separated from love of neighbor, or is the love of neighbor an expression of our love of God? Can we honor God if we neglect human need? Could it be that rather than defining piety by what we do not do, or by what we oppose, that instead Jesus calls us to demonstrate our walk with God by the good we do? Jesus looks each in the eye, and says, “Let me ask you something.

What kind of action suits the Sabbath best? Doing good or doing evil? Helping people or leaving them helpless?" Jesus tells us the Sabbath is created for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. He stuns the religious authorities into silence. He stuns the critics. He stuns those who would give the thumbs up or the thumbs down. But Jesus does much more than silence the critics.

Scene 2 Jesus asks the man to publicly stretch out his hand

We do not know the age of the man with the crippled hand. But we do know that he has more than just a physical disability from his right hand. We know he also suffers from social stigma. Because the left hand in the Ancient Near East culture, then as now, is used for hygiene. It is never extended to greet another person. The man lost the use of his good hand, the right hand used for work, gesturing, and greeting. And he is forced to use his left hand in public, adding shame to his physical infirmity.

Jesus tells the man with the crippled hand to get up and stand in their midst. And he does. Then Jesus tells the man to stretch out his hand. And he does. Jesus affirms the value of the man with the crippled hand publicly, in front of the entire community. The stigmatized man, who has used only his left hand before now, is publicly affirmed. Just like the kings and prophets of ancient Israel, those anointed by God. The man with the crippled hand is not anointed with oil, but he is still anointed. Anointed by Jesus' grace.

I witnessed a particular Baptism a few years ago. The infant's face was disfigured. It was covered with a birth defect in the skin, a blood red hemangioma. It was hard not to stare at the child. After the Baptism, the pastor took the disfigured child in his arms, and proudly walked down the center aisle all the way to the back and forward again. Proudly showing off the newest member of the church. Affirming the inherent

value of this child of God, disfigured though she was. This had a profound effect on me. This had a profound effect on the parents. Because before that day, the parents were embarrassed about their child's birth defect, and we the congregation members were afraid to look at her. But now things are different.

Scene 3 Jesus restores wholeness

Just as with a word Jesus silences the religious authorities, so also with a word he heals the man with a crippled hand. He heals the man of his physical infirmity, but also of his social stigma. He does not heal him in private. In this public affirmation, Jesus makes whole the man with a crippled hand. Not just physically, but communally. He is rejoined to community. His shame wiped clean.

In my other occupation, I see many people with incurable illnesses. Some of them are surrounded by and supported by family. But some of them are isolated. The ones who are supported are always happier and always seem to do better and live longer. For those who start out with no family or community support, one of my main goals is to help them achieve some form of support. I have seen physically whole but spiritually and communally broken people, and I have seen physically broken but spiritually and communally whole people. Only those who are whole spiritually and communally can cope with their physical infirmity.

There is a play about two beggars, a bitter blind man and a lame man who blames no one for his infirmity. They are on a pilgrimage together to a shrine. When they arrive, they are each given a choice, to be healed or to be blessed. The bitter blind man chooses to be healed and he gets just what he asks for. He regains his sight. But he is still bitter and angry for having been blind for so long. The lame man chooses instead to be blessed.

He is transformed and radiant with joy. He is still crippled but begins to dance and sing, full of hope and expectation. Which of these two beggars is truly healed? All of us know people with serious chronic illness who are full of joy. This is a wholeness sometimes unmatched by those who are physically well.

Conclusion

Playgoers, actors, and critics. Children with birth defects. To be healed or to be blessed.

Scripture tells us if we are sick, we should present ourselves to the church. We permit ourselves to be anointed with oil, and let the elders pray over us. We do not limit the power of God, but God's blessing is more important to us than physical healing. The oil is not magic. It symbolizes that God holds the sick in high esteem, the same esteem with which God holds the anointed kings and prophets of ancient Israel. God neither punishes nor instructs with illness. Sometimes illness just happens and is no one's fault. But God's loving presence and support surrounds us. God's power is expressed in love. The love of the church. And nothing can come between us and the love of God in Christ's church. **Glory be to God. Amen.**