

Epiphany 5, Year B, 2021

Last week's reading from Mark tells us that Jesus begins his ministry on the Sabbath by going into a synagogue. We are still in that 24 hour period with the passage this week. Why is that significant? For modern Christians this may fall upon deaf ears but to the Jews of Jesus' time who would have shared these stories, this would have immediately set off alarm bells that he is working on the Sabbath. Not only working, but doing it in a holy place. Mark's economic language can make it easy for the reader to gloss over these points, but there the story is for all to see. What is the significance of Jesus doing all these things and doing them on the Sabbath?

We have to go back to Genesis to put this in its proper context. *Reconciling All Things* by Katangole and Rice uses the story of Creation and Fall to explain the importance of remembering we receive what we have from God, but when we change our posture to taking what we want from God, the fruit from a tree, we spoil our world and our lives: *[the "original sin"] is the attempt to secure for ourselves what can only be received as a gift. The Christian practice of reconciliation has to do with recovering a posture of receptivity and gratitude as a key virtue – the original virtue – for Christians living in a divided world.* This is the theme of our reading from Isaiah today where the prophet asks the rhetorical question: have you not heard, have you not seen? And goes on to describe how the foundations of the world have been created by God. He is reassuring the people that in the end, all will be well. Don't live by fear, live by faith.

Working on the Sabbath, shortly after exorcising demons in the synagogue, and openly criticizing the religious leaders of his day, Jesus begins the practice of reconciliation, by behaving in such a way that remembers the true nature of things: God has created and we receive, rather than what those around him were doing: taking what was never really theirs. As people flock to Jesus, there is healing. Notice how I have said that: there is healing in Jesus. The sickness we have comes from a fear based desire to control what we cannot, often by taking what we should not. The demons and the sick in this passage are all part of Mark's scheme. We will see the sick and the demonic being transformed by Jesus all throughout the gospel because Jesus will reconcile the world to God through himself, by reminding us, by demonstrating to us the true nature of reality: God creates – we receive.

All of this sounds great in a story, and people of faith do genuinely struggle with this idea, I believe. No one wants to think of oneself as a taker. No one wants to think of oneself as being out of synch with God or the way of the universe. Certainly we read scripture and come to church to grow and learn and to shed bad habits and ideas which keep us from the love of God. But of course, if we are being honest with ourselves, including me, who is up here preaching, we will only ever really go so far. And particularly as Americans, if you come for our stuff you had better watch out. Proof of this can be found in attics and basements all around this great land of ours; it can be seen in the many storage facilities that have sprung up in the past couple of decades, seemingly overnight, so we can pay money to store things we will never use again. Certainly, we are all guilty of this to one extent or another. Certainly we have all taken more than we need. It is the history of western civilization.

For many of us, to hear such things is not all that painful. We have wondered about this and lamented it. For others, this can cause quite a bit of consternation. And this is true any time we

ask one another to take a good look at ourselves. For Jesus to walk into a synagogue as he did and work on the Sabbath was no small thing. He was asking his society to take a good look at itself. And we know how that turned out for him.

So, it is one thing to mention an idea and another to ask people to really make a change. For example, weren't you taught that Christopher Columbus was a hero and a saint? Don't we have off from school and work to celebrate the discovery of a land that had already been discovered and populated for centuries before he got lost on his way to India? But what if a different version of that same story were told, perhaps from the point of view of those who were living in this land when Columbus arrived? Would we all be able to hear it? Cognitive dissonance is a real phenomenon and when you pull the rug out from under someone's feet, you had better watch out. Those among us who are happy to rewrite the history books to get it right are also smart enough to know about human psychology. The phrase: *you should know better* comes to mind. And when you should know better, and a dog bites your hand, we may feel bad for someone's pain, but the other side of us will typically shake our head and just say, you should know better.

If we want to continue Jesus' work of reconciliation, we can't want to be compassionate to some while forgetting to be compassionate to the rest. We can't say: yes, you were raised being taught this, and then tomorrow say: but that was stupid and if you continue to believe what we raised you to believe, then you're stupid too. When we do this, people run through the halls of the nation's Capitol looking to lynch congress. Shame on all of us who should know better. We have to do better. We have to be better. Fortunately we have a faith practice that gives us the tools we need to move toward reconciliation.

Take our collect today: *Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ.* We are all invited to pray it together which says that we all agree with it to one extent or another. In the prayer, we acknowledge our sin and that we have no power in ourselves to save ourselves so we turn to the Divine to accomplish this. It is a statement of profound humility and a great baseline to work from when considering the work of reconciliation. And it is a particularly poignant prayer for all Americans.

But above all it is a hopeful prayer just as our gospel and reading from Isaiah are today. And of course it is; Christianity is a hopeful faith practice. Which is very helpful because a key ingredient in reconciliation is hope. After all, one has to hope for something that hasn't happened yet. As Jesus brings hope to the downtrodden and disenfranchised, demons flee and illness dissipates. The world around him is transformed back to the way it was intended to be. Christians have the tools to imitate this way of life bringing hope to the hopeless, giving courage to write our history as it truly happened, while we embrace the reality of human nature which fears change, thus allowing it to be transformed and making room for us all to be reconciled to one another and the world to be reconciled to God, thereby returning things to their natural order. Lift up your eyes upon high and see, all things are being made new.