

Proper 16
Luke 13:1-17

Every morning when I turn the corner from Wilder onto Makiki, I see an elderly man with his shopping cart sitting on our stone wall that faces the park. He's bent over at almost a 90 degree angle when he sits and when he walks. His spine is terribly rounded to the point where he has difficulty lifting his head far enough so that his eyes look forward. I think, more than anything, the shopping cart provides him with stability so that he doesn't fall forward on his face when he stands up – if we can call it “up.” I wish there were a Jesus around to put his healing hands on this man to straighten his spine and allow him to stand up straight and maybe even change his life ... just like Jesus did to the woman who was bent over for 18 years. Why don't we have someone around these days who can heal people like Jesus did? I'm not talking about fake healers like Benny Hinn who rake in millions of dollars each year by tricking people. I'm talking about quiet prophets like Jesus who are more interested in healing the body and spirit of individuals who find themselves in his presence.

Jesus did send his disciples out with the power to heal and forgive, but that didn't seem to last very long as the centuries passed and the church developed structure and wealth and power.

Where is Jesus today – even where are the followers of Jesus – to heal this man and so many others?

With the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington and the subsequent media reports around this anniversary, I heard a question that doesn't appear to have an answer. Who is our Martin Luther King, Jr today? In fact, who has been our Martin Luther King,, Jr since King was killed in April of 1968? King led a movement that resulted in a society where people of color were given the same rights that white men had given themselves almost 200 years previously. Of course, in reality this was a struggle in the decades following his death. Voting rights and affirmative action came into existence to help even the playing field with those white folks who had the unearned privilege of these rights. They tended to insist that people of color “earn” their rights – that they pull themselves up by their bootstraps if they wanted the same rights that so many had enjoyed because they had been born white.

These rights are beginning to disappear with laws that make them less accessible, with people who think again that it's okay to publicly destroy the spirits of people of color, with anecdotes of the return of segregation. Have you heard about the restaurant in South Carolina? A large group of African Americans had been waiting two hours to be seated; they were having a going away party and some had been regular customers of the restaurant. A white customer called the manager over and said she felt threatened by this group of African Americans and told the manager that they shouldn't be seated. So the manager went to the group, told them there was a “situation,” that they would not be served, and that they had to leave. The manager said she had the right to refuse service to anyone. They left, but once the story was picked up the media, suddenly the Customer Relations people of this restaurant paid attention to their complaints. Not satisfactorily but they could no longer ignore the issue.

Where is the Martin Luther King Jr of today?

Where is the Mahatma Gandhi of today? Or the Abraham Lincoln? Or the Jeremiah? Or any of the prophets who cause us to look in a mirror and face who we have become?

I read an article about Millennials. They're called the Me Generation, you know. Their concern is about successfully moving forward with their lives and not waiting for the generations in front of them to get out of the way. Especially those nasty Baby Boomers who seem to be responsible for holding the Millennial back. Apparently the time has come for the rest of us to realize that Millennials are ready for taking over corporate America – the rest of us need to get with the program.

Of course, that's a broad brush with which to paint a generation and of course there are exceptions, just like there are in any group. There were people who heard Jeremiah's warnings about returning to God; there were people who greeted the Emancipation Proclamation with joy; there were people who supported the peace efforts of Gandhi; there were people who marched with King. But that broad brush is used to put one group down while another insists on the right to keep a foot on the necks of those under them or to climb over them. Kind of like the caterpillar story – or the insistence of whites that people of color are less than they are – or the marginalization of those with disabilities who don't look and act like the rest of us. Truthfully? It's not just the Millennials who are the Me Generation. We live in a society that's the Me Society. Our own comfort and lives are more important than anyone else's. Only when our own comfort is not threatened, will we reach out and be the healing hands of Jesus.

Where is Jesus today? Wouldn't he make everything better? At least he could heal and cure people like the man who sits on our wall every morning.

A big part of the problem is that prophets get killed. They want things to change too much. And too much is what any one of us decides. But in fact, they just want things to change so that more have access to the institutions of our society; so that more are treated with respect and dignity; so that evil is resisted; so that there is justice and peace in the world.

Prophets get shot or pushed over cliffs or crucified. And they are often eliminated or marginalized by people whose status and power is threatened or who don't want their lives to change for any reason.

"... and ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound ... be set free from this bondage...?" Jesus asks the leaders of the religious institution.

Right. Of course Jesus was right. He was Jesus after all. And we're not. Jesus, that is.

And of course, Jeremiah was right. After all, God told him what he needed to do even if Jeremiah came up with some pretty weak reasons for not doing what God said. Jeremiah did what he was called to do even though he ended up being beaten and ostracized by his own people.

Last week, we had the bishop here for his annual visitation. He talked about change in the Episcopal Church and how difficult that has been over our history. But it wasn't just the national church he was talking about. It was our own congregations. I call those congregational issues, parish sacraments. It doesn't matter why we do them or what their affect is on others; we'd just better not change them because they're OUR sacraments. They're the way we always do things and the way we'll continue to do things.

We lost one of our members a number of years ago because he didn't come here to be challenged; he came here to be comforted and affirmed in who he was. I was too challenging. I probably still am. We all like to be comforted and affirmed. But is that what our lives are about? Is God calling us to more? To what is God calling each one of us?

We have a baptismal covenant that guides us in the specific ways that our baptism makes us followers of Christ and frees us from the bondage of our society and world. And we struggle to be Christians according to what we have promised in that covenant. At least, I hope we struggle and continue to struggle to be whom God has called us to be. How do we live out each one of those promises in our baptismal covenant?

Even more, how can we feel the joy that comes with being a follower of Jesus and a baptized Christian? Or is it just work for us? Is it just one more thing to do? Are we like Jeremiah who initially gave excuses for not answering God's call? One of the things that seems to keep Christians from living into their baptismal covenant is that they need to be asked personally to take part in a ministry. A general call for involvement doesn't work with a lot of Christians unless they're going to get something out of it personally. And then they need to be acknowledged. Otherwise they won't do it again, will grumble or complain that they weren't publicly thanked for their involvement, and sometimes will even walk away.

Where is the joy in being a Christian? Where is the joy in being the hands of Christ? Where is the joy in following what God calls us to and feeling confident that the Holy Spirit is guiding us?

What if I go and sit down next to that man on the wall some morning and just be with him. And then what if I eventually find out who he is and listen to his story? Is that what God is calling me to do? I see him at least four or five times a week. Surely God is sending me a message – God is calling me – to be the hands of Jesus and listen to this man's story and maybe even help him to be healed. Maybe I'd better start being aware of what I can do to live into my baptismal covenant and be the healing hands of Jesus. That's where the joy comes into our lives – not just talking, but working to be the hands of Jesus. There is so much more we can do as individuals and as a community to change our old ways, to put on the new clothing of Christ, and to be who God is calling us to be. We are called to be prophets in our lives – maybe only minor prophets, but remember what that minor prophet Micah said to us. "What does your God want of you? To love mercy, to do justice, and to walk humbly with your God." We are the prophets for whom we wait. So we don't have to wait any longer. God has called; we are called to answer with a resounding Yes. It's that yes that will bring us the joy of being a Christian as the healing hands of Jesus.

Amen.

Elizabeth A Zivanov+
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