

“Hidden Blessings”

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
July 26, 2015

New Testament Lesson: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 23

In his book “Breakfast at the Victory,” James Carse writes, “The highest achievement of the spiritual life is within the full embrace of the ordinary. Our appetite for the big experience – sudden insight, dazzling vision, heart-stopping ecstasy – is what hides the true way from us.” We demand that God’s works look extra-ordinary – average or usual don’t seem to be expressions of the Almighty! And yet, that’s the life we’ve been given – an average, ordinary life that includes the typical struggles faced by all humanity: injury and illness, want and need, loss and misdirection.

In today’s New Testament lesson, we see the crowds pushing in on Jesus in their attempt to deal with the typical struggles faced by all humanity. As Mark remembers it, they “rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard (Jesus) was.” And all who touched the fringe of his cloak were healed.

Don’t we wish we had even a scrap of fringe from the cloak of Jesus that we could touch and be healed? Of course we do. But, my friends, that is not how God ordained things. That is not in keeping with God’s plan for us.

As hard as it is to accept, God’s plan for us includes the possibility that from time to time we do get sick and injured, we do suffer from a lack of our wants and needs, we do experience loss and fall under misdirection in life. ***No one is perfect***, and that’s just the way God ordained things – at least on this side of the boarder of the Garden of Eden.

But the good news is that even though we no longer have access to the Garden of Eden, we still have access to God. God has not abandoned us, halleluiah; can I get an Amen!

That’s right! God has not abandoned us, and in fact, God loves us so much that God sent Jesus to us, as our divine guide and ultimate healer. The degree of guidance and healing we receive through the Lord is in direct proportion to our spiritual fitness as followers of Christ. Your overall wellbeing has more to do with your spiritual condition than with any physical or material limitation we may face.

This is what we see in today’s New Testament lesson, as we watch the earliest disciples return from their ministry of instruction and healing. Mark and the other apostles gather around Jesus and tell him all that they had done and taught – proclaiming that all should repent, casting out demons, and anointing the sick and curing them.

Now that's a job well done, a job worthy of a little break – a little rest and relaxation – which is just what Jesus prescribes for them, saying “Come away ... and rest a while.” Jesus focuses on rest, even though there are hundreds, and thousands, and hundreds of thousands of people still in need of his message of repentance, still in need of healing, still struggling with the demons that haunt humanity.

This is Jesus' underlying focus: *the spiritual*, not the physical. Jesus focuses on the spiritual because when we are right in our spiritual lives, our physical lives fall into place – all our wants and needs and losses and ailments are more manageable and even more acceptable, easier for us to accept. It may be hard for us to envision such struggles as acceptable in life, but in Christ, they are, and more so. In Christ, even our weakness is perfected.

Jesus proved in the Feeding of the Five Thousand that he could single-handedly cure world hunger. He proved in Walking on Water that what limits us is no limitation to his power and glory. Jesus proved in healing those who touched the fringe of his cloak that Christ's desire to heal and restore cannot be contained or denied.

Our encounters with illness and injury, disability and even death are not the problem here. If they were, God in Jesus Christ would keep us free from all of it, it would not be part of our daily, ordinary, human existence.

No, ours is not a physical but rather a spiritual ailment. And the aspect of our spiritual struggle that Jesus hopes to God we would overcome this day, at this moment is our unquenchable, unreasonable, ungodly demand for physical and material perfection.

Listen again to how the crowds treated Jesus. “When (Jesus) got out of the boat (along with his disciples), people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.” “And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak....” And, of course, whoever touched it was healed; God's desire to heal cannot be denied.

But neither can we deny God's divine wisdom in creating us as limited, fallible, and fragile people. Listen to Henri Nouwen's take on all of this, from his book “Can You Drink the Cup?” “Community is like a large mosaic (you know, a picture made with different colored tiles). Each little piece seems so insignificant,” says Nouwen. “One piece is bright red, another cold blue or dull green, another warm purple, another sharp yellow, another shining gold. Some look precious, others ordinary. Some look valuable, others worthless. Some look gaudy, others delicate....

However, when all these little stones are brought together in one big mosaic portraying the face of Christ, who would ever question the importance of any one of them? If one of them, even the least spectacular one, is missing, the face is incomplete.

Together in the one mosaic, each little stone is indispensable and makes a unique contribution to the glory of God. That's community," says Nouwen, that's humanity "a fellowship of little people who together make God visible in the world."

So you see, perhaps God's purpose in allowing for illness, unmet needs, misguided thinking, and even death is that only in our weakness do we see God most clearly. Something to consider. After all, we are the ones who succumbed to weakness in the first place, in the Garden of Eden. God created us perfect, never having to experience illness, injury, want or need, or even death, as long as we chose God over our own desires.

But in the Garden of Eden, we chose desire over God. We took from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and ate of it, when God had told us not to. We thought we knew best, over and against God.

And we've been choosing our way over God's way ever since. Take for example the state of Ohio, where I hail from. In an attack on religious freedom, Ohio had to fight to keep its state motto that says, "With God, All Things Are Possible." What are people thinking!?! I'll tell you what we as a people are really think; just look at our actions and choices in relationship to God. And just listen to these ridiculous alternatives to Ohio's state motto, as reported by The Plain Dealer newspaper:

Instead of "With God, All Things are Possible," how about "Without God, some things are impossible." Kinda funny. Or how about this one, "With money, all things are possible." Not so funny. Or this one, "With the ACLU, no God is possible." Really funny. Or finally, this one, "With the Tooth Fairy, all things are possible." Now that's just silly. No, I kinda like the original: "With God, All Things Are Possible," even the raising up and redemption of our fallen and broken human nature.

God took our weakness and transformed it into strength, took our limited vision and transformed it into a prism or reflective glass through which we see the very image of God, like a mosaic of Jesus made up of otherwise broken, mismatched glass tiles.

Given such insight, we can actually look upon our human condition and begin to better understand the words of the Apostle Paul when he said to the Christians in Corinth: "... We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal."

I know it's hard to grasp – the grace and mercy of God given to us, even amid our frailty and suffering as human beings – hard to grasp, and yet, there for the taking. We don't have to chase after Jesus like some misguided crowd in the wilderness in order to be healed and perfected. In Christ, that has already been accomplished.

It is precisely in our weakness that ***Christ reaches out to us***, overcoming the suffering of this world. And all we have to do is accept it – accept Christ's presence in our lives and receive the spiritual – if not also material – healing and provision that he brings.

The next time you or someone you know is sick, or in need, or dying, let us not go chasing after Jesus to prevent that which God has already perfected in Christ. Rather, let us embrace our suffering, our sickness, our common need, and even our death and the death of others as the sacred moments they are, moments when we get to glimpse the love and care of God more brightly and vividly than ever before, even through our tears. For in these moments we find hidden blessings, hidden blessings amid our need and suffering that are unforeseeable, but oh so dearly needed, and oh so freely given, by God. Amen.

Pastoral prayer:

Disturb us, O Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves;
When our dreams come true only because we have dreamed too little;
When we arrive safely only because we sailed too close to the shore;
When with the abundance of things we are losing our thirst for more of God;
When in loving time, we have ceased to dream of eternity;
When in our desire to build on this earth, we have lost our vision of a new heaven.

We long to glimpse your Heavenly Kingdom, Lord, which you assured us is near, which you assured us is now. Help us to live into your Kingdom promises, promises of peace in the midst of war, healing of body and soul in the midst of illness and distress, forgiveness amid criticism. Help us to be instruments of your will, O God.

We pray for those who need you most at this time – those who have suffered a loss, and particularly Sharry Willoughby and all the family on the death of her father, Donald.

We pray for those who are ill, injured, or suffering from disease, and particularly for Cliff Mackie, adult son of Carol and the late Carl Mackie, who suffered a stroke; and for me as I undergo surgery on my hip in Aug. May the treatment and rehabilitation for all in such need be a witness to your restorative, healing powers.

And we pray in thanksgiving, O God, that we receive your restorative and healing and guiding touch upon us in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ.

So it is with thanksgiving, hope, and the assurance of your divine promises that we pray together now the prayer that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**