

To Provoke

Wayne Waibel – 08/21/2022

One of the fundamental advantages of belonging to a community of faith with some seasoning is that we are pretty much immune to the abject stupidity that generally accompanies youthful exuberance. It's a wonder any of us live through our twenties.

The point I want to make is that we are all – to varying degrees – comfortable with our own mortality. For the most part, we've had a full life and now that we have a chance to reflect and take stock – we pretty much view our journey with a mixture of gratitude and wonder.

Into this mindset, we are privileged to infuse the teachings of our Lord and co-mingle our study of Scripture. Those inspired components translate to an arch of understanding that is only possible after time spent in the trenches of life.

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It's easy to identify the antagonist in this morning's gospel lesson as the ruler of the synagogue who tries to admonish the multitude for not showing proper respect for and adherence to the Sabbath.

It's also easy for us to find fault with the prevailing attitude that fosters that kind of admonition, but aside from the obvious – there is an alarming dynamic at play here which does not readily lend itself to identification, much less understanding.

During the time of Moses, the Sabbath was an integral part of what was viewed as a righteous life. Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy. Almighty God took a day to step back and assess His creation – to see that it was good. So too – humankind is ordained to acknowledge the Sabbath in all its holiness - that the world and we can take a collective cleansing breath. Whether we think we need it or not – we need it.

And the keepers of the covenant took their responsibility very seriously. The guardians of the gate, the rulers and leaders have an obligation to follow the rules and do their best to instruct and advise others in their keeping. It is not a role without merit, and in the early days of Roman occupation, it was occasionally essential.

What happened over the course of centuries however was a slow but steady erosion of the meaning behind some of those rules – of which – the Sabbath was a prime example. Somewhere along that trajectory, the ruling elite conveniently lost sight of the fact that the care for God's people in need is at the very heart of our faith.

By the time Christ burst onto the scene, the Jewish elite had taken the Sabbath and its honored tradition of refraining from work to acknowledge the Lord's sanctification of it to give institutional and communal foundation to the law, and turned it into an instrument of social control and oppression. It's of little wonder that Jesus would take exception to that.

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The keepers of the rules in our world are all around. We encounter them all day every day. In my youth I labeled these guardians of the status quo as itsy-bitsy people with their itsy-bitsy rules.

This attitude did not play well with my superiors during my Naval enlistment. When they insisted I stencil my name onto my dungaree shirt pockets, I obliged by stenciling my social security number. Oddly – no one really had a problem with that little act of defiance. They probably figured I had acquiesced on some level.

Doing good is not the point for the guardians at the gate of an oral tradition that undergirds their societal structure. Jesus' good deeds undermine that social order. It's no accident that Christ seizes this opportunity to provoke their scorn and turn the people towards praise.

Jesus intentionally uses this unnamed woman's affliction to make His case. She did not seek Him out and no one petitions Him on her behalf. In Luke's gospel between the parable of the fig tree and its focus on repentance and the parables of the mustard seed and Leaven and their focus on the kingdom of God lies this episode of healing which serves to illuminate the pastoral and prophetic.

While there are many accounts of healing, this one in particular resonates with people of antiquity and the postmodern world we live in. The vast majority of miracles are accomplished by the Master's command. He casts out demons, calls the lame to walk, etc. But in this instance, there is the added element of touching, "And He laid His hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God."

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At that time – to touch someone who was considered unclean was strictly forbidden if you were to be considered righteous in the eyes of the Jewish state. So Jesus was not only playing fast and loose with the Sabbath, but flirting with certain disaster by laying His hands on this poor woman.

He knew exactly what He was doing. For sure He was going to provoke the ire of the ruler of the synagogue by healing on the Sabbath and that was setting into motion His intent to direct the multitude towards praise on the heels of the Pharisees scorn. Mission accomplished.

But the bigger picture here is His act of charity – by laying His hands on her – He was demonstrating what love looks like. By putting His healing hands on a woman who had undoubtedly gone without any human contact for eighteen years – think of it – eighteen years – He was reminding us all of what our mission should be.

Christ’s touch – though unnecessary for healing, is nonetheless used to convey a sort of welcome back into the community from which she had been excluded because of her “uncleanness.”

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The book of Jeremiah reminds us that a call to God’s service is not a carefully considered career choice. It’s usually met with reluctance, excuses, and refusal, but ultimately, we come to understand that the One who calls will also sustain.

God equips the called, He does not call the equipped. Each of us will exact the full measure of devotion required to fulfill our call to ministry in this world. Time has amazing power to nurture pebbles of faith into bedrock.

While I don’t see a need for scorn in the world – it exists a-plenty. It may even be well meaning in that some adhere to the notion that only constant reproach will produce an excellence.

I'm sure we've all had that boss who refuses to submit a performance evaluation that contains anything other than criticism based on the misguided notion that excellence doesn't need to be acknowledged. Their entire assessment is based on your shortcomings - because that is where you need to concentrate your focus.

Ultimately God's justice and judgment must be included in God's love. We, however, are not God. We need to nurture and support one another – not chastise and berate.

In the final analysis – those folks will be looking down the halls of an empty castle because no one wants them around to spoil the celebration of life. I know that's a simplistic view, but I come by it honestly.

In the long run, choosing praise over scorn will provide right worship, and right worship matters. Right treatment of the poor and the marginalized matters. The Bible is not an instruction book. It's an invitation to dialog.

You begin with that, and it leads to trust that where Jesus is, the kingdom is. When you have that trust, it leads to a renewed ability to affirm faith; a renewed affirmation of faith leads back to praise – and praise is a sign of hope, hope that endures in times of great stress. Amen.