

On the Margins

In our broader community in South Snohomish County, if people know me, they know me as someone who speaks up for and tries to help the folks on the margins in our community. They may know about our affordable housing for low-income seniors or that I got Lynnwood city government to pay attention to homeless folks in a way that didn't involve arresting them or running them out of town. They may know that we've been involved in the operation of the area's Emergency Cold Weather Shelter since its inception. They may have heard about my work with the City's Taskforce on Police Relations with Communities of Color and the follow-up work by Unidos. They may be aware of how we host Shepherd's Village and other work we do on behalf of homeless and hungry people. They may even know that I marched with the Poor People's Campaign during the summer of 2018 and that I've continued to meet with the local leaders of that movement. From time to time, knowing some of these things about me, someone will ask me, "Why do you get involved in these things? Why do you care about these people?" Usually, I give the credit to you all. I explain how you brought me here to help with the project that became Shepherd's Garden and how that opened my eyes to the reality of homelessness. I tell them about your long involvement in housing and food issues, about the Hospitality Network and Habitat and the Crop Walks and the food banks. All of this, of course, is true and it pleases me to brag a little about you all because I believe you've been faithful to your call and because I love you. But sometimes I want to say to those who ask me why I do what I do, "Don't you know the story of Jesus? Don't you know who he hung out with and cared for? Don't you know what the Bible actually teaches about the poor and the sick and the powerless and how we are to help them?" That's what I really want to say, sometimes. Fortunately, the older I get the more I'm able to curb my smart mouth, as my Mama called it, so I don't say those things. But sometimes I'd like to.

Because that's what motivates me at the deepest level and I suspect it's what motivates you, too. Jesus really did hang out with the marginalized folks of his day. He fed them and he healed them and he loved them. He learned to do that from his Mama and, I suspect, from his Papa, too; Joseph the carpenter, I mean. He learned it from hearing the Scriptures read in the synagogue and from the teachers in the Temple. At some point, theologians always argue about when, Jesus learned about caring for those on the margins directly from God. It was his mission and he took it seriously.

In the verses from Luke which I read a moment ago, we have two stories about times when Jesus interacted with those folks on the margins. I suspect both of these stories are familiar to many of us but it's always good to reexamine parts of the Bible that we think we know. There are often surprises at hand for us. I made it a point, when I read the story just now to emphasize something that often goes unnoticed or that we may automatically "correct" as we read or hear the story so that it corresponds to the way we think it should be. I'm talking about the narration in verse 20: "When he saw *their* faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.'" Did you catch that? We tend to think in a case like this that it must have been the sick man's faith that enabled Jesus to heal him but that's not what it says in the Gospel. "When he saw *their* faith..." To me, this shines the light on something we should have already noticed in the story: the paralyzed man had friends who cared for him. They cared about him enough to bring him to Jesus that day. They cared about him enough not to be dissuaded by the crowd that wouldn't let them through. They cared about him enough to work out an alternate solution. They cared about him enough to risk the wrath of the homeowner whose roof they destroyed. The paralyzed man

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may have played his part in this, too. For all we know, he begged these men to bring him, implored them to find a way to get him to Jesus, spurred them on with whimpers of “yes, yes, tear up the tiles.” But we don’t know that. He could have been saying, “No, don’t bother. Not even Jesus can help me. Oh, don’t tear up Issachar’s roof, he’ll kill us.” We don’t know. But we know that Jesus looked at him and his friends and saw *their* faith. It is a reminder to us that those on the margins need the help of those who are better abled, better resourced, better connected. They need us.

It’s more likely that we’ve all noticed and reacted to the words of Jesus and the religious leaders who were there that day. “Friend, your sins are forgiven you... Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” To both Jesus and his opponents, the man’s condition is in some way linked to sin. It may be that Jesus knows that the man will not be able to experience healing until he has experienced forgiveness. But it is fairly certain that to the Pharisees, the man’s paralysis is the result of his sins. He suffers because he is a sinner. His physical condition is God’s judgement on him. This may sound unreasonable and cruel to us. It’s not likely that our theology contains a belief in sickness as punishment from God. But do we, sometimes, almost unconsciously, shy away from the sick and the disabled as if they really are to blame for what has befallen them? Hang on to that question for a bit.

The second story, the calling of Levi the tax collector, gives us another opportunity to see the religious leaders marginalizing those they consider sinners. After Jesus calls the tax collector to come and follow him, Levi celebrates by throwing a party for Jesus and his friends. And, he invites his own friends, other tax collectors and those whom the establishment characterize as “sinners.” “The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’” We should notice that there is no indication that Levi has done anything wrong other than take a job from the occupying Roman government, a government that has been in place for about 25 years following almost 70 years of Rome propping up the rule of the Herods. Levi is, as far as we can tell, making an honest living, working for what many would have accepted as the legitimate government of the area. But in the eyes of the Pharisees and their scribes, he is a sinner. His politics are wrong. He doesn’t interpret the Scriptures the way they do. He’s different. None of that makes a difference to Jesus, unless of course he’s making a statement of his own. Does he call Levi because he knows it will aggravate the Pharisees or just because he knows God loves Levi and the other tax collectors, too, that in fact God loves the whole world? As the late Will Campbell used to say, “Mr. Jesus loves the bigots, too.”

Again and again in the Gospel narratives, Jesus shows that he stands with the marginalized. With the sick, with the collaborators, with the hungry, with the prostitutes, with the nobodies. It seems to be a pretty clear indication of what he intended for his followers to do. Naturally, we’ve messed it up, almost since the beginning. If you’ve read Luke’s other book, The Acts of the Apostles, and many of Paul’s letters, you’ll remember that there was quite a to-do about whether or not Gentiles could be disciples without also becoming Jews. After all, they were religiously on the margins according to the earliest followers of Jesus, all of whom were Jews. And that’s not the only way in which early Christians fell into the same trap that tripped up the Pharisees. In James, the general epistle from Jesus’ younger brother, we hear that the Christians are giving preference to the rich over the poor, despite some pretty sketchy behavior by the rich:

“My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?”

In a few minutes, as we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we are likely to hear the words of Paul from I Corinthians: “For I have received from the Lord what I also handed on to you...” How many of you remember that these words of institution follow Paul’s warning to the Corinthians about divisions between rich and poor believers at the Supper? Apparently, in those days when Communion was connected to a “love feast,” it had become common at the church in Corinth not to share and share alike in the meal “potluck-style,” but for each family to bring their own meal to eat. The rich, not bound by hours of labor, came early with gourmet food. The poor arrived later, after work, with only their regular meagre fare. Paul sets them straight: “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!”

Since the very beginnings of the Church, Christians have found it easy to slide from the rigorous but rewarding way of Jesus back into the way of the dominant culture. Please hear me: I’m not accusing anyone of anything this morning. But I do think that these are matters we should all consider and be on the watch against, myself included. We need to ask ourselves, how do I marginalize people today? Do I go out of my way to welcome and assist the disabled or do I act in subtle ways as though there was something wrong with their humanity? Do I treat those whose political opinions are different from mine as though they were unrepentant sinners or do I respect their intelligence and their choices? That one’s hard for me, by the way. When I hear that someone has health issues, do I immediately blame their “bad lifestyle choices?” I’m pretty sure that “bad lifestyle choices” is the 21st century equivalent of “sinners.” Do I look at the poor and wonder if they were too stupid to advance themselves, or too lazy, or just not good enough in various ways? When I think of immigrants, do I think, “Well, they’re just not like us?” When I encounter LGBTQ folk, do I see God’s beloved children or do I see sinners, deviants, defectives? If you are blessed enough to ask yourself all these questions and find no spot in your thoughts or behavior, then ask yourself, “Who do I assign to the margins of my life?”

I cannot, in good faith, speak to you this week and not grapple with another set of verses proposed by Brian McLaren in his look at the way we are called to deal with those on the margins. The image of the shepherd is obviously familiar and important to us in this church family. We’ve called ourselves Good Shepherd Baptist Church for nearly 60 years – we should probably be thinking about a party next May to celebrate our Diamond Jubilee. With that name, we acknowledge several things. First, the long history of using the “good shepherd” image to

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describe God, as in, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Also, Jesus appropriated the image for himself. We often read part of John, chapter 10, in which his words are found on the fourth Sunday of Easter, sometimes known as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” We remember that Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” But what we may not be so quick to remember is that God calls on leaders among God’s people to be good shepherds, as well.

In the book of the prophet Ezekiel, God instructs the prophet to deliver the following charge against Israel’s leaders: “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them... Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.” Leaders who do not care for the sheep but who instead live off of them are enemies of God. Are our leaders, the leaders of our government, of our industries, of our churches, good shepherds or bad?

Even the sheep of God’s flock have responsibilities toward the weaker sheep. Again, from Ezekiel 34: “As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet? Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.” How are we doing, Good Shepherd? Are we caring for the lean sheep at every opportunity? Are we protecting our pasture and our clean water?

Ezekiel 34 concludes with a promise: “I will set up over them one shepherd, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God... They shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they are my people, says the Lord God. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord God.” This is the gracious promise of God for us, for all of us sheep, lean or fat, even for those of us who push and shove to get our way, even for those of us who’ve been pushed and shoved all our lives. In the grace of God, expressed through the self-giving love of our Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, all sins are forgiven, all sheep are fed, all creation is loved and called good. In the Beloved Community, no one is on the margins. And so we come to our celebration of Jesus’ great loving act for all of us, all of his sheep, all of us who try to be good shepherds, all of us who reach out to those others would put on the margins, in remembrance of him and his acts and his words and his love. For all of these things, most of all for our Good Shepherd, thanks be to God.