

“The View from Down Here”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
August 25, 2019

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 13:10-17

It turns out that, for those of you who were here last week, you are not the only ones who have had a worship service interrupted by something surprising and uncomfortable. Just as last week’s worship service seemed to embody the gospel passage that spoke of Jesus not bringing peace, but division, and households dividing against themselves, in this week’s gospel passage, we see a worship service: Jesus teaching from the scriptures, in a synagogue, on the Sabbath, when a woman’s physical, bent-over body passes into Jesus’ line of vision. He left behind the sermon he had planned, and instead called the woman over, freed her from her bondage, laid hands on her, and then she stood up, perfectly straight, and began praising God. But some listeners could not share in her joy. Another voice interrupted the worship service: it was the leader of the synagogue, and I can picture him curling his lip, furrowing his brow, and pacing back and forth while he laid down the law: You can’t work on the Sabbath! Any other day would have been fine, but not on this day which is to be set apart for God!

As I think about the similarities between what happened last week and what has happened in our sanctuary as some differences of opinion were shared, with passionate emotion, during the holy act of worship, I cannot help but wonder: Is the Bible trolling us? Or are we trolling the gospel? I will not fall into the trap of assigning roles of the gospel characters to any of the people of our church. The truth is, any one of us could be any one of the people today’s gospel passage mentions.

There is part of each one of us that feels hunched over, carrying burdens-- whether they be of guilt or shame, or of stress, of grief, of fear, of anger so eager to erupt that we have to contort our bodies around it just to contain it, of family entanglements that just keep pulling us down, or of actual, physical distress. We come to church, and we hope and pray that this Sunday might be the day that Jesus can make those burdens just a little lighter, that we might leave the church standing just a little bit taller.

There is also part of each of us that longs to be healers, to reach out and touch people in a meaningful way, and see them stand tall. Our church does this in beautiful ways, whether by teaching one of the 8 English Conversation Classes that happen each

semester, or helping to provide for survivors of domestic violence who seek refuge and try to rebuild their lives, or by going on a mission trip. Our church calls forth healing through the Deacons who offer blessing and prayer over any one of you, with the touch of oil, when you share with them what troubles you. And all of us, whether we witness the baptism of a young child, or support their Christian nurture by helping to provide loving Sunday School classes, want to watch those little ones, who start so small, grow to stand tall in the light of God's love as they experience it here at church. "Before you were formed in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you," God said to the prophet Jeremiah. Maybe, like the boy Jeremiah, any one of our kids will grow to go to whomever God sends them, and speak whatever God commands them to say.

Of course, there is also part of each one of us who get nervous and anxious-- myself included-- when worship does not happen as expected. And part of all of us is just like the rest of the crowd, wondering, "what does all of this mean?"

What *does* it mean that Jesus would interrupt a worship service to offer healing to a woman who had spent 18 years at a 90-degree angle? I was wondering this question as I reflected on last Sunday's worship, and also on the mission trip that began immediately afterward.

When we were on our mission trip, we worked very hard, but on the first day, we did not see the people who would benefit from our labor. The organization that sponsored us had purchased an abandoned church building, and they plan to turn it into a community center and feeding program that serves the poor. Our work was to clear out water damage in the building that had happened from a flood last year. We ripped drywall from the ceiling; we pulled up damaged carpeting; we removed wooden floorboards that had been warped from the water. Our work team ranged in age from elementary school children to someone who is technically a senior citizen, but who could fool anyone by the amount of work she puts out. We knew all this would one day be for a good cause, but because the people who would be served were not yet there, we had to have faith that it would happen.

The second day, we worked with an urban empowerment agency to plant a community garden in the yard where the community center was being built. We shoveled a mountain of dirt into 10 raised garden beds, and the children picked and planted the first seeds and plants that would start the garden. We learned that the neighborhood of Atlantic City where we were working is what is called a "food desert," meaning that there is no grocery store or place to buy fresh produce. Some of the people from the

community showed up to work alongside us, including a graffiti artist, a restaurant owner, and Ronny, a young man who stayed at Covenant House, which is a homeless shelter serving youth and young adults. Ronny was working through Covenant House as an intern, which meant he would help out at different community empowerment projects around town. This work not only gives him some payment that is helpful; it will be a great reference on his resume, and give him skills to later find meaningful employment and hopefully a way out of homelessness. In addition, he is getting to know his own gifts as a helper in the community, as someone with something to offer to help others stand tall.

On the third day, we started the day helping out at the Food Pantry at the church we were staying. The little kids helped to sort food, and the older kids and adults helped clients carry food out to their cars. By that time, we realized that there were different pockets of poverty in different sections of the city. Most of the clients of the Food Pantry where we were staying were white. One of the clients had been the hostess in the restaurant where we had eaten our first night there. In other sections of Atlantic City, there were people who were homeless, hungry, or both who were Asian and Asian American, Hispanic, or African-American. The reasons for their poverty included everything from hotel workers who aren't paid a living wage and cannot afford to care for their families; mental or physical illnesses; gambling addictions that had caused people to lose the shirts off their backs in pursuit of the glitz and glamour the casinos sold; and drug and alcohol addictions. The weight of the poverty we saw in a state that has such a high overall standard of living was back-breaking. I found myself wondering, "How can these people ever stand tall?"

But then we met Barbara. Barbara was a client of the Food Pantry. Even after she got her food, she stuck around, greeting all the other clients by name and helping them carry their groceries to their cars. After the Food Pantry closed down, Barbara then hopped in the van with us to go to do more work at the community center. She gifted us with her story on the ride over. She told us that she had been a teaching assistant in a school, was married and was living the middle class dream. But then she started hearing voices, and these voices pulled her from the stable life she had known. She started drinking to drown out the voices, but that only made them worse. For ten years, she lived out of her car, or on the street, or sharing a couch in someone's home when they would let her. She began going to different religious communities, seeking release from these voices. Some places told her that she was hearing voices because she was a sinful person, and she needed to turn away from her sin in order to get well. Other places tried to lay hands on her and cast out demons. She approached each religious experience with great hope, but left each one with deeper shame. She had been eating

her meals at a place called Sister Jean's Kitchen, which-- unlike the Salvation Army or the Urban Mission, did not tell the people they served that their poverty is because the live sinful lives. Instead she met Rev. John Scotland, who also happened to be our host last week. Rev. John told Barbara that her illness was medical and not spiritual. Since that moment, she has had treatment for her mental illness, and with the right meds, and a good amount of encouragement from the Presbyterian Church where she is now a member, she no longer stands with her body hunched over. She stands tall. Not only that, she is thrilled to take part in bettering her community. She worked side by side with us on a very hot day, pulling up boards and clearing out a space that will one day serve many. Working alongside her, although I had heard her story of homelessness, I did not look at her with pity or with scorn. I saw her and rejoiced, for what she could give to her community was a testimony to the restoration Jesus offers. Though clearly wounded, she could also be a healer.

Paul compared the church to the Body of Christ, in his letter to the Corinthians. Whether she stands hunched over or whether she stands tall, I believe the view from this woman in our lectionary passage today represents the eyes of Christ's body. You see, the body cannot be fully complete until it includes the view from down there: those who are burdened, or poor, or on the margins. Jesus called her a Daughter of Abraham. But maybe she should also be called Daughter of Hagar, a woman who had been sent into the wilderness, with no food or water, with the young son she had through Abraham. I am sure she was bent over when she realized she might have to witness her son dying. And yet, "God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink." Hagar, who shows up in Genesis, is the first person in the Bible to address God directly by a name. "You are El-roi" she named him, which means "The God Who Sees."

I believe that Jesus, who calls forth new life, who touches and offers healing, who frees people from bondage... Jesus, whom even death could not contain, this Jesus has also seen the view from down there. And that is hopeful news for us. Like a teacher who gets down on their knees so they can look a child directly in the face, we know that Jesus can find us and meet us at angles we thought no one would ever enter. Jesus sees us, and calls us to see others around us as well. What would we be like if we as a church were known for having such vision?