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2nd Sunday in Lent

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Utter Helplessness”

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Mark 2:1-12

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" —he said to the paralytic— "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

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Utter Helplessness

In the Netflix series *Stranger Things*, a group of young friends in a small town accidentally stumble upon an alternate universe, which is exactly like their own, only not quite. In this other place, their small town still exists, the geography is the same, the houses are all in exactly the same places, with the same features, yet there is something decidedly not right about this world. There is an unidentifiable chaos that rules there, a power that seeks to inflict destruction and pain. The friends come to call this other place *The Upside Down*, and throughout the series, they attempt to close the broken place in their own world that leads into this world of chaos.

Our series on the Beatitudes and Amy's sermon last week had me thinking about this idea of *The Upside Down*. Christ's message of blessing for the very least likely people in the world does seem to turn everything we know on its head. Clearly, this notion seemed inconceivable even to some who heard it when it was first spoken.

When the scribes saw the paralyzed man being brought before Jesus, they must have thought the man's friends were joking. Their world taught them to view the poor – physical, spiritual or otherwise – as useless at best, as sinful and deserving of their condition at worst. To show mercy to a man who was clearly being punished by God for some unknown, but obviously, terrible offense was outside the realm of possibility for most people of faith. They couldn't even imagine it. Yet here was a man who claimed the power not only to forgive whatever this paralyzed man had done but then to heal him and make him whole again.

Richard Rohr reminds us that in light of the Beatitudes, this is exactly the kind of thing that now makes sense. Jesus opens our eyes to an alternate universe —the Kingdom of Heaven —which overturns the conventional trust in human power, possessions, and personal prestige.

This is the kind of world where the poor might thrive, and where those who mourn may be comforted. And just in case we are unclear about who Jesus meant by that, Rohr again offers some helpful background.

The word that is translated as 'poor' or 'poor in spirit' in this text is *Ptochos*. At first, *ptochos* simply meant "to be in material need, to be in poverty". Gradually, its use spread to other areas besides economics. It came to describe people in weakness, dependence, defenselessness, affliction, or distress. The poor were understood to be people who recognized their utter helplessness before what life

had dealt them. They understood that it was not within their own power to change their situation.

In other words, the poor acknowledge a reality of human life that so many others are afraid to see: that we are all utterly helpless. Faced with the chaos of this world, which one of us hasn't felt defenseless, weak, or in distress?

But Richard Rohr also reminds us that this sense of our utter helplessness does not have to be a cause for despair. For it is the first step toward realizing God's blessing. "Poor in spirit," he writes, "Means an inner emptiness and humility". When we are "wealthy" (in spirit) we are full of ourselves, eager to display how much we know, how much we can do. There is no room for God's Spirit to move within us, and we see no need for God's mercy. When we are poor, we are emptied, devoid of the illusions of ego, vulnerable. It is in this place that God's mercy is made known to us.

Perhaps no poverty of spirit can make us feel more vulnerable, emptier, or more in need of God's mercy than the experience of Mourning. Grief is a feeling that we are often unable to deal with, or adequately express as modern humans.

Jesus describes those who grieve as feeling the pain of the world. There are some people who just cannot help but grieve. May Boatwright was one of those people. May is one of a trio of sisters living in 1960's South Carolina that we meet in the novel *The Secret Life of Bees*. She is naïve and unassuming, a grown-up and a child at the same time... as long as things stayed on a happy note, May did fine. But May felt the sorrows of the world more keenly than most people do. The author, Sue Monk Kidd describes May this way:

Most of us have a built-in protection around our hearts that keeps the pain from overwhelming us. May... doesn't have that. Everything just comes right in ... all the suffering out there... and she feels it as if it is happening to her. A squashed bug or even a rotten tomato could cause her eyes to suddenly well with tears. The television news of a young black man shot to death in Georgia, and the sight of his grieving widow and their young children could send May into a fit of despair, rending her clothes, tearing her hair, and crying uncontrollably. Her sisters had tried to get help for May. But most doctors just called her crazy, and suggested they put her "away". "Put her away", as if locking her in a room, out of sight, would enable the rest of us to go on floating through our days unassailed by the reality of the sorrows that surround us.

Our world tells us that people like May don't belong, that those who mourn are unsightly and should be put away. To us, living in this world, tears seem ridiculous. Tears are not fun, they are not pretty. They make us look weak. So we fill our lives with diversion and entertainment. We learn to hold back our tears. We turn our grief into anger, and we direct it at one another, never realizing the destruction that we bring about.

In light of this reality, what Jesus teaches us is revolutionary: a heart which grieves with others is a gift. Those who possess it are blessed. Christ invites us to imagine what our world might look like, if more people felt the pain of others as their own, and truly mourned with them in their loss. We all know mourning. It is inescapable. You don't get to live without experiencing grief. But the radical good news is that our comfort comes when we are willing to admit our brokenness when we let our grief be known and shared with one another.

Just as Amy taught us last week, the Gospel that we hear in the Beatitudes turns our world upside down. From where we stand, that seems exactly right. But friends the truth isn't that God turns our world upside down.

We are living in The Upside Down.

We have turned the world of God upside down. In our brokenness, we bring about destruction and chaos. When we look upon our own helplessness or see helplessness in others, we believe that means we are worthless. We are the ones who make the blessing of an open and sensitive heart into a curse in the context of this upside down and broken world.

God set out to turn things right again through Jesus, a man who began his teaching, not with promises of happiness, or power, or strength, but with the promise that God's mercy breaks into this broken world most of all in the hard human experiences like mourning, and poverty of spirit.

God dares to search for the places that are torn. It's in these places that God offers us a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven, an alternate universe that is exactly like our own, yet radically different. Within the Kingdom of Heaven, "blessedness" does not depend on wealth or health or status. It is not a reward for righteousness. Rather, blessedness is God's sheer gift. In a world that has been turned right again by God, life is not governed by honor and shame, but by God's promise of abundant life. Jesus' form of "blessedness" only makes sense in light of a world oriented toward God, a world that feels upside down to us. This is the world Jesus calls us to visualize through the Beatitudes. This is the world we are called to do all that we can to bring about here and now.

Amen