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From the Pulpit

Sermon ~ The Gravity of Grace

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ January 15, 2012

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Mark 3:1-6

Again Jesus entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

I was born in the South – in Alabama – which in the 1950s had as its automobile license plate motto: "The Heart of Dixie". I was born while my father was a professor at Auburn University so I actually learned to talk with a southern accent. As a kid I sounded like Bo from The Dukes of Hazard with just a higher voice. Fortunately (I must confess my bias) the accent didn't stick since we moved on from there to the University of Gainesville and finally to the Washington DC area where my father began to work for the federal government.

I only lived in the South for a few years and my parents, having come down from the north, did not share the bigotry and racism of that decade or region. And yet as I think back to that time I realize now that I must have eaten at segregated restaurants and drank from "white only" drinking fountains – not because that was the bias and prejudice of my family but because that was the reality of the 1950s in the Deep South. And when injustice is a part of the very fabric of your society it's hard to recognize that you are wearing the garment. A decade after I

was born the racial segregation that was straining the heart of our country became a national coronary as the headlines and the film coverage captured the images of civil rights activists being beaten, bombed and water cannoned by the likes of Bull Connor's Birmingham police, the KKK, and a racist South that believed their carefully prescribed lines would preserve their society.

People in authority –in fact just people who benefit from the current system – often use laws and rules to try to maintain things the way they are. Even at the expense of someone in need – even at the expense of someone's healing and freedom – people in authority and those who benefit from the default assumptions of their society will preserve and maintain a system that prefers themselves and punishes those who would challenge or change the status quo.

The gospel of Mark begins not with Jesus' birth but with a plunge into the river Jordan at his baptism and a springing up from those waters, almost charging out into ministry. In rapid-fire succession Mark records both the positive and negative responses that Jesus received from both the common people (the positive responses) and the religious establishment (the negatives) in the first couple of chapters of his book. Most of the early negative judgment that he got from the religious leaders surrounded his failure – in their mind – to keep the rituals and rigors of the Sabbath.

In our text today Jesus has entered the synagogue (I love what this says about the value and priority that Jesus put on church attendance; but I digress to my own agenda!). There is a man there with a physical deformity and disability – a withered hand – which in that economy of manual labor and hardscrabble agriculture would have been an economic burden to say the least. Add to that the religious assumptions of the day that anyone suffering an injury or ailment was being judged by God for their sins and this man would have found himself not only economically deprived but religiously ostracized.

But it gets worse. The text tells us that the religious leaders watched Jesus to see if he would heal this man. It almost seems like they had set this up or at least realized this could be the test they were looking for. How it gets worse is that the man with the withered hand had been reduced down to being seen as mere "bait" in the attempt of the religious leaders to trap and condemn Jesus. Verse 2 says, "They watched Jesus to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him."

They know Jesus. They don't like him, but they know him. They know he is a man who gravitates towards the person in need and towards the place of hurt – he just can't help himself; he can't help but be a part of bringing healing to hurting people. Which is a great truth about our God: God doesn't stand aloof and uncaring, above our needs and unaffected by our troubles. No, God moves towards the hurt, moves towards the place of pain – moves towards us in our time of need. This is what I call the gravity of grace – not its seriousness; not gravity like we might have grave concerns – but gravity in the sense that it has a downward attraction to it; like it pulls one towards its center – like it acts upon us with a force that is both unseen and unyielding. Grace is like a downhill slope where all the healing streams of God's love run to and collect as a pool of help and hope. The gravity of grace brings this crippled man and the healing Christ together.

The only trouble is – at least as the religious leaders saw it – it's on the Sabbath. And they had surrounded God's command to honor the Sabbath with so many caveats and conditions

– so many rules and regulations – that it ceased being a time to focus on God and became instead a day to prove that the already religious people like themselves were worthy and right.

Now, to be fair, these religious leaders had certain situations and conditions in which they would allow someone to assist another – for instance, if it was a matter of life and death. In other words, they understand how compassion and freedom from suffering can take precedence over religious ritual; they just didn't think it applied to this guy. So Jesus presses the case. He says to them in verse 4, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?"

When it comes to compassion Jesus reduces our choices to a binary option between that which is good or evil; that which harms or gives life. Unfortunately, at least in this case, Jesus doesn't allow a lot of middle ground and gray area for the complexities of the situation or the nuances of theology. He just says you either help or you don't. The religious leaders would say, "Wait. Wait, because there are other days in which to heal; wait for one of those days." The people who are well and well-off always ask those bearing burdens to wait for their relief. Except in this passage the religious leaders don't say that out loud – elsewhere in the gospels they do, but not here; here they say nothing.

The religious leaders are silent – they are unwilling to concede his point; they are locked in a bitter partisanship that will not allow them to agree and join with Jesus even when it means bringing healing and relief to a hurting person. Out of their standoff comes a remarkable verse that is unique in the entire Bible: it's the only place where it says outright that Jesus was angry. It says in verse 5, "He looked at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did and was healed.

As a result the Pharisees went out and conspired with the Herodians (who, by the way, they did not otherwise agree or even get along with) how they might destroy him. The gravity of grace moves Jesus with compassion to the place of need; the flipside of that is the hardness of heart that holds the others back and has them plotting Jesus' destruction.

I thought about this whole gravity of grace thing when, in the beginning of the week, I was reading from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s letter from a Birmingham Jail. His letter was a response to some of the clergyman in Birmingham who had criticized him for coming down and stirring up the crowds into protests; they felt like he was an outsider intruding into their affairs. He had been jailed as a result and therefore had time to formulate a response to the critique of these white religious leaders who were obviously hoping to preserve the delicate fabric of their society. In response as to why he had come Dr. King said, "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here." I'm here because injustice is here. In essence he's saying, 'I'm here because I am on the downhill slope of the grace of God that flows inexorably to the place of need... and this is a place of need. I'm here because this is a place in need of healing. I'm here because it's where Jesus would be.' Friends, here's the uncomfortable truth: the gravity of grace compels and impels us to the place where injustice lives, where freedom is denied; where wounds are raw – where healing is required. The gravity of grace is the Christ within us who then just naturally moves towards the place of need taking us with him.

It's fascinating how those white clergymen reflect the caution and critique of the religious leaders of Jesus' day. They also wanted the marchers to wait; they wanted to see the civil rights movement slow down and work for a more orderly transition; they wanted Dr. King to wait and be patient not stir things up. In his response Dr. King writes in his Birmingham Jail letter, "I have never yet engaged in a direct-action movement that was "well timed" according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

On this Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. weekend we want to celebrate the courage of those who stepped past the threats and warnings of others who wanted to preserve things the way they were and worked for freedom. We want to celebrate those who know that the gravity of grace sends us to the place of need. We want to celebrate the God who says no to religious formalism in order to say yes to needed healing. And this is certainly not restricted to the civil rights movement alone; the gravity of grace calls us to work wherever God moves us to care and to act.

This past year Javier Sicilia, a well-known poet and author in Mexico, learned that his son had been brutally murdered by one of the drug cartels for speaking out against them. In response Javier attempted to draw together the people to speak with one voice and by virtue of their numbers to say to the country and its leaders, "We're fed up!" Javier was one of the people highlighted in Time magazine's selection of the Person of the Year as the many faced protester of 2011 – Javier was just one of them. Javier organized a 32 day march across Mexico to the capital city where over 100,000 people joined in protest to say, "No more!" In reflecting on his part in the protest and how he got involved in leading it Javier simply said, "I did only what my heart was telling me to do." See, that's the gravity of grace: it's almost not a choice – it's just a natural outcome for those whose hearts are stirred and moved by God and it leads us to new places of response and need.

The gravity of grace takes us to surprising – and maybe even risky – places to be a part of God's healing work in the world. In small yeses and in bold and daring forays those who know Christ and have him in their heart will find themselves sliding down the slope of God's grace into the place of need, there to become a part of the healing help and hope. May it be so for our church and for ourselves in this new year.