

“Healing Decisions”
Mark 1:29-39
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5th Sunday after Epiphany
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“It makes me ill to look at that,” I heard someone say outside of my office the other day. I judged the voice to be female speaking to another female friend. They were looking at the wall of white men who have served as the head pastors of our church over the years. “I know,” the other person said. “With everything going on in our world it just says so much.” Part of me wanted to open the door and say, “It was a lot worse when they were downstairs by the front door.” But in that moment I imagined – maybe correctly, maybe not – that if I was one of the women standing there looking over that wall, the last thing I would want to see is another white man – the next face likely to go up on that wall.

Patriarchy is everywhere. I get sick of it myself even though in some way I’m part of it. Seeing 3 white men in the top 3 positions of power up on the podium at the State of the Union. Watching them use the fresh grief of African-American parents as a wedge against immigrants, many who have suffered the same kinds of unthinkable losses at the hands of the MS-13 gang. It makes me sick, too. I can relate to what a close colleague - an African-American preacher, a dear friend - once said after a particularly demeaning experience, “I didn’t want to see any white man ever again.” I can relate to a friend on Facebook wrote recently “Until further notice, I do not want to talk to white men, boomers, non-voters, or anyone who doesn’t read balanced news sources.” I can relate to the anger of my daughters around the dinner table processing the discrepancy between men’s and women’s sports – the tv coverage, the salaries, & the product endorsements.

So it’s depressing to come to church and hear a story about a woman in a house, sick with a fever, who, after being healed by Jesus, immediately gets up and begins to serve the male disciples standing around doing nothing. The woman has been down for the count with a fever. *They* ought to be serving *her*. It’s depressing to hear it read by a white man in the pulpit even though I’m the one reading it. Patriarchy is everywhere, like a flu virus that keeps morphing, adapting to save itself.

I was just about ready to chuck the story altogether this week especially with everything going on in the world until I noticed the word that the Gospel uses for “serving.” It’s diakoneō, from which we derive the word deacon – one who serves other people. The angels diakoneō (served) Jesus in the wilderness. It’s a word that will be used all through the Gospels as Jesus tries to get through to the disciples to try to teach them and us the way to both of meaningful life and a just society. Service is the highest calling.

But the disciples don’t get it. James and John, who are standing here at this first healing, are the very same disciples who will argue over who gets to be first in the kingdom of God. “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,” Jesus tells them, “and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave

of all.” “For I came not to be served (diakoneō) but to serve (diakoneō). (Mark 10:45)

And close to the end of Mark’s Gospel the word shows up yet again while Jesus is on the cross. The disciples have all fled save for a few key women – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. “These used to follow him,” the text says, “and *provided for him* (diakoneō) while he was in Galilee.” (Mark 15:41)

Service is what counts. It’s all laid out right in front of their eyes. Service is the way to life and faith. From the angels, to Simon’s mother-in-law, to James and John’s jockeying for position – the example *not* to follow, to the women who refuse to leave Jesus in the hour of his greatest suffering, in the hour of his greatest need. It’s what Jesus came to do. Service is the way.

Unless of course that’s just another trick up patriarchy’s sleeve. Teach women and other people not standing on the power podiums that service is the way so they’ll stay out of the way. How well as it really worked out for those women who surrounded Jesus? They’re more often remembered by the church as supporting actors rather than the starring leads. Servants aren’t the ones who make their way onto the lists of the rich and famous. They’re not the ones whose portraits hang on the hallways to our history. They’re not the ones who end up standing on the podiums vested with our power.

Maybe Dr. King’s mantra that everyone can be great because anyone can serve is just a phrase that people in power trot out so that they don’t have to work as hard in keeping their subjects in line. Maybe service really isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be.

Serving others certainly *seems* like it’s fallen out of favor. We no longer think about immigrants primarily as vulnerable people deserving love and compassion – the service of others - but as threats to our security. We no longer think of public office as the place where good people are chosen to work on behalf of the wellbeing of us all, but the place where power hungry people are sent to demolish opposition to one’s chosen special interest. We no longer think of teachers and diplomats and police and FBI agents as public servants, but government bureaucrats taking too much of our tax dollars, or corrupt robbers posing as cops, or just pawns in a chess game destined to be sacrificed for the monarchs above them.

Service is only a sacred vocation for people who haven’t yet lost their naiveté. That’s the way the disciples seem to see it. They see service as irrelevant to power. They dismiss service like the women who practice it – as outside the main narrative. And you can’t blame them for it. Everyday in the Galilee they must wake up to a new headline about what the Roman overlords are up to – consolidating their power, undermining those on the margins, manipulating the security services of the state for their own protection. Everyday they wake up and wonder what kind of evil is Caesar going to unleash today. And when you wake up to headline after headline, day after day, you start to think that’s all there is, you start to think there’s nothing else that’s significant, you start to believe there’s no other way.

Yet naïve is hardly a word that can be applied to Jesus. And the kind of service that Jesus teaches doesn’t seem irrelevant to the powers that be. His kind of public service quickly becomes a *threat* to the powers that be – it’s what lands him on the cross. It’s as if Jesus has already made decision that no earthly tyrant lasts.

No earthly empire lasts – not one. Or maybe he’s made a decision that God’s justice has avenue beyond our understanding, beyond our access. He’s already decided that no Pharaoh, no Caesar, no Fuhrer is going to last. As if that’s the earthy truth, then the real question is whether or not you are going to make a decision to serve, make a decision to heal, make a decision to resist those temporary tyrants without becoming one of them in the process.

It’s a choice he invites his disciples to make – a choice to heal instead of hurt. A choice to love instead of fear. A choice to forgive instead of retaliate. A choice to give instead of just to take. It’s a choice made harder, maybe when your face isn’t ending up on the walls of power, but no less significant.

I don’t know how James McCune Smith made that choice. Born in New York in 1813, 14 years before legal emancipation in NY, he and his mother lived in fear of slave-hunters who raided homes in order to recapture fugitives. How did he not choose to hate? He attended an African Free School in NY, founded just a few decades earlier in a country whose President Jefferson had once declare that blacks “are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.” How did he not choose to hurt? Considered one of the brightest graduates of the African Free School students, he was nonetheless denied entry into the medical schools of Geneva, NY and Columbia University solely because of his race. So with help from NY abolitionists, he boarded a ship to Scotland where he attended medical school in Glasgow. How did he not choose to give up?

He returned to NY where he practiced medicine to patients of all races. He chose to serve. He delivered lectures in Philadelphia yet was rejected admission to medical associations include the American Medical Association. But he kept choosing to serve. He was appointed as physician to the Colored Orphan Asylum – physician to over 200 children in residence most of whom had been abused, neglected, and abandoned. To get there some years he was forced to walk 6 to 7 miles daily because the street car wouldn’t allow a black man to ride along. It was as if nothing could stop him from serving.

Frederick Douglas named James McCune Smith as the most important influence on his life. He chose to serve.

Friends, I know we are in dangerous territory in our country – perhaps more dangerous than we’ve ever been. Some of us have written letters, marched, posted, voted, protested – all good ways to resist the dangerous death-dealing that is present in our country in this moment. It is our responsibility to resist evil, to fight injustice, to reject division and fear. But as the French pastor of the little town reminded his congregation on that foreboding day when France surrendered to Nazi Germany in World War II, we must resist “the violence that will be brought to bear on [our] consciences *through the weapons of the spirit.*”¹

One of those weapons is service – diakonia – the choice to heal instead of hurt. The choice to love instead of fear. The choice to forgive instead of retaliate. The choice to give instead of just to take. The choice to view every person regardless of race, religion, legal status, disability, age, or nationality first and

¹ Pastor Trocme of Le Chambon, a village in France that harbored thousands of Jews during WWII.

foremost as a human being – a precious child of God deserving of love and compassion and humanity. It's those choices that will not only bring down tyrants; they will give us the foundations to build in the ruins tyrants invariably leave behind.

The disciples missed it. They saw service as irrelevant to power, when it was the most powerful weapon they had to wield. They dismissed service like the women who practiced it – as outside the main narrative, when all along it was the main event. And you can't blame them for it. Everyday in the Galilee they must have awakened to a new headline about what the Roman overlords were up to. Yet right in front of them was Simon's mother-in-law, and Mary Magdalene, and Mary, and Salome, and Jesus all making a choice. A choice to serve.