

“Habits of Faith: Proclaiming (I)”

Mark 10:35-45

Rev. Andrew Connors

Proper 24

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One of the hardest things about being a Christian is the embarrassment and offense I experience at the beliefs and actions of other Christians. It seems like every week I'm asked to explain Christian support for misogyny, homophobia, and racism emanating from some Christian pulpit. Or explain why some Christians are so obsessed with sexual purity culture and afraid of things like feeling good. Years ago I ran from the word “evangelical” and thought that would be sufficient. But today it's hard to even stick with the word “Christian.”

So I suppose it's comforting to know that going all the way back to Jesus, some of his closest disciples were doing and saying embarrassing things, too. Jesus has just told his disciples for the 3rd time that his prophetic ministry invariably leads to the cross. The powers that be will not allow the message that he's been preaching to spread - they will kill him. And James and John turn around and ask for the privilege of sitting on Jesus' right and left as if he's about to take the Jerusalem throne. It's embarrassing! The writer of Matthew's Gospel was so embarrassed by this behavior that his version of this story has the mother of James and John ask on their behalf so they don't look so stupid. Matthew threw momma under the bus.

But as Chuck Campbell points out, we might have a little more compassion for James and John if we notice that just before this little embarrassing event, the disciples were afraid. They were afraid of death and dying. They were afraid of the consequences of living a life committed to the Jesus way of loving your neighbor as yourself, not maligning your enemies, seeking the wellbeing of all, divesting from your possessions, working for justice. They were afraid. And when I know someone is acting out of fear, I'm much more likely to meet them with compassion than with condemnation.¹

We are living in our own time of fear and it's taking its toll. Johann Hari an atheist who has become less stridently so as he's grown and worked on his book *Lost Connections* spent years trying to understand why anxiety and depression have continued to increase almost exponentially in our culture. Why is it, Hari wanted to know, that each year, more and more people find it harder to get through the day.”² Hari's interest in the subject stemmed from his own adolescent experience of

¹ Chuck Campbell, “Homiletical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), pp. 189, 191.

² Johann Hari on “Kelly Corrigan Wonders Podcast,” September 2, 2021, <https://www.kellycorrigan.com/kelly-corrigan-wonders/category/Johann+Hari>

depression when his doctor told him matter-of-factly that it was nothing more than something malfunctioning in his biology.

From his review of the research around the world, Hari concluded that there are actually nine different factors that can be involved in anxiety and depression - two of those are definitely rooted in biology. The remaining factors are rooted in the way we live. All human beings have psychological needs, he found - the need to belong, the need for meaning and purpose, the need for a future that makes sense. And yet we are the loneliest society in human history. One survey asked Americans to answer the question how many close friends do you have you could call on in a crisis? Years ago, when people were asked this question, the most common answer was 5. But today the most common answer is none. 41% of Americans agree with the statement: "Nobody knows me well."³

That's why, Hari concluded that while anxiety and depression can often be treated in a biological way and sometimes needs to be treated with medicinal interventions, it can also be a signal that your needs are not being met. A painful message that we really need to hear. Hari went deeper into one findings of one researcher who tested the teachings of the philosophers that Christians have absorbed as part of our faith - that "the more you think that life is about money and showing off. . .the more likely you are to become depressed and anxious." Research has shown this to be true.

The same research has shown that we have become more and more driven by these values - what Hari calls "junk values" that appeal to our legitimate human needs with promises that cannot satisfy. Those junk values, he summarized, are "if you want to be happy, work really hard and buy a load of stuff you don't want and show it off on social media."

What really got my attention in the interview was when Kelly Corrigan said, but isn't it interesting that it's some religious people who have been making these arguments. And they have said that one way to protect you from the junk values that capitalism pummels you with everyday is with the counter narratives that religion can provide - be kind, think of others, be deeply involved in your community, tithe and give away to those who have less, etc., etc. first"

And Hari confessed that this is what has softened his atheistic proselytizing over time. "Tomorrow let's imagine everyone lost their faith," he said, "and mostly what we'd be left with is the absolute dominance of these junk values."

⁴Which makes me want to be an evangelical again. Not the kind of embarrassing judgementalism that gets all the airtime, but the kind that says look what these junk values are doing to us! Look at how greed for gain can build an entire waterfront neighborhood without a single affordable housing unit in Harbor East, or a vulture

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

capital firm can destroy the Baltimore Sun, robbing our community of its flagship free press. Look at how chasing after the most competitive job, or university admission or the largest house in the priciest neighborhood can turn you into a fearful, anxious, lonely person! To proclaim this counter narrative, this alternative possibility of serving others - of mutuality, caring, repairing the harms of the past, not because I've figured it out enough to earn a spot above someone else in this pulpit but because It's the message that needs to be raised above the noise. I need this message as much as anyone. I need this narrative to counter the bombarding messages that now come across my electronic leash every minute of the day. I need this message that deserves to be proclaimed consistently and persistently as a part of our stewardship of the earth and its creatures who are suffering from the dominant narratives that need countering.

That counter message from Jesus is one of love. It may not seem like it what with all this talk of the cross. But we do have to die to that false life of acquisition, the dead ends that come when our lives are driven primarily by the fear of losing, or the fear of not being loved because of what our body looks like, or what we don't yet own. We have to die to that and be reborn into a kind of living that, Jesus argues and I guess now research suggests, actually delivers what it promises.

That is simply this - that besides your basic physical needs - food, shelter, clothing, the most important thing you need in your life is to be loved. And if you've got those people, I'm happy for you. If you're like Paul Simon and have a momma who loves you regardless of where you go in life, that's awesome.⁵ But if you don't there's a God I often call mother, father, parent whose love is there for you. Who wants you to be satisfied with the gift that is your life, the work that you are called to do, the life you are called to live. She loves you.

⁵ <https://www.paulsimon.com/track/loves-me-like-a-rock-8/>

“Habits of Faith: Proclaiming (II)”

Isaiah 53:1-12

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In some of our biblical texts, suffering is completely meaningless. In others it is completely unjust. In others it is the consequence of injustice, or even understood as God’s punishment for wrong. This is true in life. Some losses are so premature in our calculus that we declare them unjust - cancer in kids, the car accident that took a life, the heart abnormality present from birth that didn’t show itself until it was too late. Other kinds of suffering we bring on ourselves - too many drinks before getting behind the wheel, savings liquidated chasing after get rich schemes, not applying yourself in school, betrayals of trust big or small. Still others seem to lead to something deeper and redemptive. The painful road to recovery that puts you on the spiritual path. The loss of that single biggest relationship that taught you that you are fundamentally okay. The firing from the job that woke you up to your purpose in life.

All of these perspectives are present in the stories of our faith just as they are present in the stories of our lives. The important thing is to correctly discern what sort of suffering is happening in your own life. For example, to say to someone who has lost a child, God took your child to teach you a lesson is cruel and offensive. I’ve learned through the years that the only person to draw conclusions about the nature of their own suffering is the one who is experiencing the pain. It’s not that I can’t have insight into the nature of someone else’s pain. It’s just that this insight when offered unsolicited serves no healing purpose. Or as Ann Lamott wrote, “What’s the difference between you and God? God never thinks he’s you.”⁶

I think that’s why the best approach to suffering - yours or someone else’s almost always begins with prayer. That ancient prayer for help. It puts us in the position of acknowledging our needs which in my experience is one of the hardest things for people to do, especially well educated people who can distance themselves with intellectual analysis. We like to be in control, to have the right explanations, the right approach, the right technique before we approach the throne of grace, as it’s called. Yet, the most honest prayers are the uncensored ones from the heart of our feelings - prayers from the center of ourselves. The ones that don’t always pass theological muster.

This presents an interesting juxtaposition between the “fit for consumption” prayers of our liturgy and the ones that I actually pray sometimes when I’m by myself or being totally myself instead of some expected public persona. “Oh God, if it be your

⁶ Widely publicized, but I can’t remember from which book it comes.

will, let your healing flow” in my prayer life is more like “God, I hate cancer and I sure as hell hope you do, too. And I’m asking for a miracle even though I don’t believe in miracles because I love this person and I know you do too.” Or “God please guide the wisdom of our leaders” gets prayed in private more like “God, I’m so tired of these selfish sons of *#\$ in political positions of power who care more about clawing onto their little corners of the world at the expense of the planet. Please, rip them from their seats and turn things around!”

Ann Lamott wrote that “My belief is that when you’re telling the truth, you’re close to God. If you say to God, ‘I am exhausted and depressed beyond words, and I don’t like You at all right now, and I recoil from most people who believe in You,’ that might be the most honest thing you’ve ever said. If you told me you had said to God, ‘It is all hopeless, and I don’t have a clue if You exist, but I could use a hand,’ it would almost bring tears to my eyes, tears of pride in you, for the courage it takes to get real-really real. It would make me want to sit next to you at the dinner table.”⁷

This too needs proclaiming in the church. We need spaces to share our suffering - to speak it, pray over it, process it, swim through it with others who aren’t afraid of it because they know not to confuse someone else’s suffering with their own. To show to each other the permission that has been given by God and exercised by Jesus himself to speak our pain, protest or accept it, learn from it or reject it or some combination trusting that when we do, God is close. Perhaps showing up like that is the best kind of stewardship we can provide to our own lives and to this community - the core conviction that what God wants with us is a real relationship. A relationship with the real me. A relationship with the real you. The person who has real needs, real hopes and dreams, real losses that God wants to know.

⁷ Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, (New York: Riverhead Books), 2012, pp. 6-7.