

## **Meditation on Mark**

We here are Christians, that is we are disciples of Jesus Christ committed to following his way of being. At least in part, what makes this possible is the fact that Jesus was a human being like us, so there is much to be learned about how we, as human beings also bearing something of the divine, are called to live in the world, and know we are capable of doing so. Since the beginning of the church people have debated what mixture of human and divine Jesus was, but nevertheless I think we can all agree that he was human. Like us, a woman gave birth to him, he had flesh and bone, and he was raised among his people learning their culture, ways, and belief, and perhaps even their biases regarding who God did and did not love.

Jesus would've been brought up in a religious culture of believing that the people of Israel were God's chosen people, and that God's favor was theirs and theirs alone. Thus, when Jesus finds himself confronted with a Gentile woman, that is a non-Jewish woman, and one whose people were once enemies of his own, his immediate reaction is not what we might expect from the divine Jesus. His reaction is a human one. This woman comes to him and bows at his feet seeking help and healing for her daughter and his response is to say, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The children he refers to are the children of Israel, and all others like this woman, in his words, are dogs. It's a harsh statement, a dehumanizing statement, that says to this woman that the gifts Jesus has, aren't meant for her, but for those that he seems to believe are better than her; his own people.

But this is his initial reaction. Her response changes his mind. She says, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." This is all she says, but it's enough. This encounter with this outsider stranger helps Jesus to realize that the gifts of God's love and wholeness he has come to share are more than enough for the world, not to be restricted by human boundaries, purity codes, tribalism, or anything else for that matter. In response to her words he doesn't just share a crumb with her daughter, but restores her fully; he makes her whole. It's also worth noting that the next Gentile he encounters that asks for healing receives their request without hesitation. This encounter with the Syrophenician woman is a moment of conversion for Jesus, that opens him to recognizing that, again, the gifts he possessed and was sent to reveal and share, were meant for all. Gustavo Gutierrez, the father of Latin American Liberation Theology, says that Christian conversion isn't so much about belief but about conversion to our neighbor, for it is in love between one another that we experience God. Encounters with those we may see as other often have this effect; the effect of humanization, of being able to see the other as God sees them; a beloved child worthy of love and abundant life, then we become compelled to love them as such.

I'm certain I've shared bits of his story with you before, so forgive the repetition, but it seemed too relevant to pass up. Archbishop Oscar Romero, whose image I wear today, was the bishop of San Salvador, El Salvador in the late 70's until his assassination in 1980. As a priest he served amongst the poor and believed in charity toward them, but he experienced a deeper conversion. When his friend, Father Grande, one who was already converted to the poor and working alongside them to better their situation, was assassinated in 1977, Romero began spending time with the poor in a new way. He listened to them. He listened

to their stories of hardship, of family members disappearing, being killed by their government for seeking a more just distribution of land and wealth. He became converted to seeing them as worthy of love and life, and worthy of food not just from the crumbs of their supposed superiors at the table. He came to understand that to follow Jesus was to work to address the root causes of their poverty, that is to seek justice, to seek wholeness, rather than feed them scraps just to keep them alive. He came to understand that to really love them would mean committing himself, his gifts, and his resources to the cause of supporting their struggle for a full life in this world. Romero was martyred for this commitment. He remains for us a model of discipleship. I suppose the question for us is who do we need conversion toward in order to live out the gospel more fully? Are there people we as individuals or a community perceive as outsiders? How do we, as disciples, reflect the boundless love of God revealed in Christ to all people?

### **Sung Prayer**

**Breathe on us, breath of God.**

**Fill us with life anew.**

**That we may love the way you love,**

**Living our faith in you.**

### **Meditation on James**

As Jesus, it seems that the early church struggled with bias, particularly related to class and dictated by appearance, perhaps an ageless struggle. They too seemed to think that there were those who were worthy, and those just worthy of the crumbs; people judged as worthy of good treatment, and others who could sit at their feet. The author of James, then, speaks out against such acts of favoritism toward the materially wealthy. It's a call that as disciples of Jesus, we too should be converted towards our neighbors and committed to a different way of being, rather than operating in the stratifications that the world sets for us and teaches us. While the author highlights God's special love for the poor, at no point does he advocate for a removal of the rich, also named as oppressors, from the community, rather I believe he advocates for the conversion of those with power who oppress the poor to change the way they operate and to abide by the royal law spoken by Jesus to love their neighbor as themselves. It is a call to a living faith, not simply a faith defined by the heart or mind, but the body as well, recognizing that bodily needs are as necessary as the spiritual. What good is it, he says, to speak to a naked and hungry person to go in peace and keep warm and eat their fill if the community isn't willing to help meet their needs? The call of the Christian community, according to this letter, then, is to a living faith of creating equity, of justice, where such disparities do not exist. In the author's words, a faith that is focused purely upon the spiritual is a dead faith, but a faith that is rooted in action informed by the Spirit is alive, a living faith. Dean Brackley, a Jesuit professor who served at the University of Central America in San Salvador throughout the 90's, called this downward mobility. He says, "I invite you to discover your vocation in downward mobility. It's a scary request... The world is obsessed with wealth and security and upward mobility and prestige. But let us teach solidarity, walking with the victims, serving and loving. I offer this for you to consider – downward mobility.

And I would say in this enterprise there is a great deal of hope.

Have the courage to lose control.  
Have the courage to feel useless.  
Have the courage to listen.  
Have the courage to receive.  
Have the courage to let your heart be broken.  
Have the courage to feel.  
Have the courage to fall in love.  
Have the courage to get ruined for life.  
Have the courage to make a friend."

Reflecting on this quote, Christopher Kerr writes, "We are often able to make choices that shelter us from the path of "downward mobility." The encounter with the homeless person on the street that never happens because we choose another path. A conversation that never takes place with a co-worker regarding the demeaning comments made toward another colleague, because it would be too awkward. Or the letter never written about the unjust labor practices connected with a favorite clothing or grocery store, because there is just never time. The path to downward mobility has many entrances that we can choose to take or pass by every day."

Romero's was a living faith, as that of Christ. It was a faith reflected in downward mobility, a faith of action; a faith that lives on in his people. Pastor Kelly and I travelled to El Salvador on an immersion experience in July and worshipped one morning in Romero's crypt in the lower level of the national cathedral in San Salvador. Hundreds gather there every Sunday for worship. As you look around the room you see farmers fresh from the fields, or so it would appear, and businessmen in suits, and everything in between, and all are embraced. I mean that quite literally as the passing of the peace is hugs and kisses on the cheek and a moment of saying hello that lasts for a few minutes as people really make the rounds. Furthermore, they are a community committed to walking with and supporting those who are struggling to have a full life. During their time of prayer, symbols were processed down the aisle and presented to the priest representing various struggles in El Salvador and around the world, and memorials for anniversaries of massacres of the poor that took place during the civil war in the 80's. It seems that it's a community of faith embodying what the author of James was seeking, and embodying Romero's own words. He said, "Some want to keep a Gospel so disembodied that it doesn't get involved at all in the world it must save. Christ is now in history. Christ is in the womb of the people. Christ is now bringing about a new heaven and a new earth."

Again, another question arises. Are we at St Lucas a faith community that embodies what the author of James sought, embodies a conversion toward our neighbor free of judgment? Are we at St Lucas a community that embodies a living faith engaged in Christ's work of bringing about a new heaven and a new earth? Let's look at some evidence. (video)

Amy Medina back there at the sound booth, and Megan Ligeti, our Communications Coordinator, made this video to highlight how we are indeed a community of living faith. As you saw we are engaged in the world in many life-giving ways, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and meeting bodily needs as well as spiritual. But our work is not done. Where

will you go? What will you do? How will you jump in? What will we do to engage in downward mobility as the Gospel beckons, and live our faith in a way that transforms lives and the world as people living out Christ's example, sharing the boundless, life-giving love of God?

**Chorus**

**Breathe on us, breath of God.**

**Fill us with life anew.**

**That we may love the way you love,**

**Living our faith in you.**