

Pentecost 3B, June 10th, 2018

1 Samuel 8: 4-11, 16-20, 11:14-15, Psalm 138, 2 Cor 4: 13-5:1, Mark 3:20-35

Putting the Sabbath into Place: A Kind of Madness

Introduction

Last week, we read about Jesus' healings on the holy day where 'work' was apparently prohibited, as the Sabbath, was deemed by religious law, to be a day of rest. In our thinking together, we dwelt upon the meaning of Jesus' words, "*The Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath*". I suggested to you, and we concluded on this note, that this idea serves as the foundation, the cutting edge, for New Testament Christian social ethics, I suggested to you, that put in broader terms, it come to this: *People matter. Systems exist to serve people, not people, systems*. Today's readings repeat this theology, this ethics of *people matter*. The first, from the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Samuel, the prophet warns against Israel's desire to adopt the political model of kingship where, the people will end up serving the interests of the royal court system, shadowed in our Chinese fable about Lady Meng and the Emperor. The second, from, as last week, the Gospel of Mark, is more subtle, more difficult, but for that reason more interesting. So, let's unpick the threads!

The Gospel: Mark 3:20-35

Do you know that saying in English, "the whole world is mad, apart from you and me...but even you are a little mad". Well, in this story, everyone is mad, everyone appears insane. In the first instance, Jesus' family appear on the scene, embarrassed by, fearful of the stir he is creating. This family episode marks the beginning and end of our reading - a sort of parenthesis. In between, we read of another conflict, another skirmish: the ongoing quarrel between Jesus and the pharisees. It is a continuation of the disagreement about Jesus' healings, his exorcisms. The accusation that he is of Beelzebub, is a more dangerous form of the charge that he is mad: in essence, the accusation is that Jesus represents the mindset, the psychology of evil. Jesus' response, however, is to push back. He counter-charges that his family are confused and clueless, and more seriously that the pharisees, are so perverse, that they mistake goodness for evil (the sin of the Holy Spirit). So, what is going on here and how does it relate to the core message of the Sabbath, that people matter more than systems, that religious, social, political and economic systems are to serve people, not people systems? Let me offer the following points:

First, let's note that the language here is cosmic language: God, demons, Beelzebub, Satan, and so on. It can all become confusingly 'other-worldly' for us moderns in the 21st century, for we think in different terms. But - and this is the point - the cosmic language, this 'other-worldly' speech still, points to concrete, earthy realities and the conviction that evil derives from human beings, and in large part, in the way we organize ourselves, the way we structure our communities, our societies, our cultures. This is the insight of the Sabbath principle: people matter more than systems, precisely, because it is the systems that we build around ourselves that are the problem. Evil then is not fundamentally cosmic, it is human. Let us not spend our time gazing into the heavens and the world of spirits! It is here where evil and goodness make their appearance.

Second, what then do we make of this accusation against Jesus, that he represents cosmic evil, that he as a demon drives out demons, and is therefore a fraud?

To understand the accusation, we need to substitute cosmic language – as I just mentioned – with earthy language. We can best understand the ancient idea of demons by using another word: violence. The accusation then is this: that through his exorcisms, Jesus is practising a kind of violence on those already suffering violence. And yet, that is exactly what he is *not* doing. Instead of putting into practice the institutional/religious violence of the pharisees, Jesus actually exposes, unmaskes the legalistic rules-based faith, for what it is; putting in its place, a practice that is grounded in generosity and acceptance. The exorcisms of Jesus, then, are genuine expulsions of violence by generous divine power, and not just another turn of the screw inside a violent system.

The fact is this: at the heart of the New Testament story, there is an irruption, an upsurge a certain “madness/craziness;” Jesus affirms boldly with no ‘ifs and buts’ that God forgives freely, eagerly and always excessively. It is this mad generosity that is hard to live with, that keeps ‘the world’ unsettled. This is what challenges our systems, based as they are, in the conviction that generosity is a scarce commodity.

People matter more than systems. Systems are there to serve people, not people, systems.