

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 1, March 1, 2009, dedicated to the memory of Donna Willis, to Fred, her loving husband of 48 years, and always to the glory of God!

“Jesus and Praxis”

Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

**(Part II of VIII in the sermon series
“Jesus Before and AFTER
Christianity”)**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In the first sermon on Ash Wednesday, “Jesus and Catastrophe,” I raised the question: What did Jesus hope to achieve? To do this, we looked at his decisions and his choices – particularly his choice to follow John the Baptist to the water of baptism.

Today, in “Jesus and Praxis,” we ask what did Jesus do about the catastrophe he saw before him? Let us look at how Jesus reached to people, especially the poor and oppressed and how he healed and forgave others.

From the baptism by John in the Jordan to the temptations by Satan in the wilderness, Jesus moves from his own cleansing to

getting down and dirty with the devil. He moves from catastrophe to “*praxis*” – meaning “his habits or his ways of behaving.”

First, as he decided to be baptized by John, Jesus also decides not to make baptism the centerpiece of his mission. Instead, seeking out, helping and serving the lost sheep of Israel is Jesus’ purpose and mission. To begin this mission, he has a showdown for 40 days with Satan in the wilderness. He confronts his own worst enemies in the desert and he lives to write down this story as Satan asks him to turn stones into bread, offers him the kingdoms of the world if Jesus will but worship him, and challenges Jesus to jump from the top of the temple to prove that God will save him. Satan challenges Jesus to act like God and demonstrate God’s power over the world and over life and death. Satan wants Jesus to dazzle him! But, that is not the mission of Jesus!

Martin Luther wrote on this passage:

“Throughout his life, Jesus conducted himself so humbly and associated with sinful men and women, and as a consequence was not held in great esteem, on account of which the devil overlooked him and did not recognize him. For the devil is farsighted: he looks for what is big and high and attaches himself to that; he does not look at what is low down and beneath him.” (Philip Yancey quoting Luther in *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1995, p. 71).

Rather than dazzle the devil, Jesus exits the desert and turns his attention to the people who are referred to in the gospels by a variety of terms:

“The poor, the blind, the lame, the crippled, the lepers, the hungry, the miserable (those who weep), sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, demoniacs (those possessed by an unclean spirit), the persecuted, the downtrodden, the captives, all who labor and are overburdened, the rabble who knew nothing of the law, the crowds, the little ones, the least, the last, the lost sheep of the house of Israel,

and the babes.” (Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, Orbis Books, Eighth printing, September 2008, p. 27).

In other words, Jesus moves in with the poor and the oppressed and begins to minister among them. In Jesus’ day, everyone listed above was sweepingly referred to as “the sinners.” The “sinners” were social outcasts. Anyone who deviated from the law and the traditional customs of the times was treated as inferior and as lower class. It is fair to say, by this definition alone, most of the men, women, children of Jesus’ time were sinners. But, as I said on Wednesday, Jesus was all about changing the hearts, minds and actions of ALL people. To repent, or turn around, was work to be done by everyone! So, he set to work.

Jesus was very aware that according to the systems of injustice in his day and age, there was no practical way out for the sinner. For example, no prostitute could be made clean again by an elaborate process of repentance, purification and atonement (Nolan, p. 30). She couldn’t buy her way out because her money was tainted. The tax collector would have to give up his profession, making full restitution and then add 1/5 to everyone he had wronged. The “uneducated” would have to go through a lengthy process and expensive process to prove they were “clean” and educated, with the final assessment being left to the religious leaders, who were not known to give a clean bill of health to the uneducated.

To be a sinner, therefore, was one’s lot in life. They were blamed for everything and there was no way out. Beyond their economic and social privation, their suffering took the form of constant frustration, guilt and anxiety. They knew they were captives of sin and they knew they couldn’t break out of this condition. (Nolan, p. 30).

Sin and suffering were always present. And as you see, sin was not always a fully deliberate act. One could sin by mistake or by ignorance. One could also bear the sin of another person’s act – like children of illegitimate sexual unions – for as much as 10 generations, which by my count is hundreds of years for one baby!

But, that's the world in which Jesus lived – a fearful, a hostile, and a merciless world. The oppressed – the people who didn't count – in Jesus' world were the overwhelming majority, and Jesus moved in with the majority, or the "crowds" as Mark calls them. This cycle of "sin" boggles our modern imagination!

Jesus stepped right into this mess with both sandals! He went to people, broken bread with them, had parties with the poor. He got right into the mess and embraced those in greatest need. He acted with grace, mercy, justice, forgiveness and unconditional love for and with the poor and the oppressed.

There is only one word that summarizes the reason for his actions. That word is "**compassion.**" Jesus was moved with compassion for the crowds when he healed their sick (Mt. 14:14). He was moved with compassion because they were distressed and dejected like sheep without a shepherd (Mk 6:34). He was moved with compassion by the plight and the tears of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:13). He had compassion on the leper (Mk 1:41), on the two blind men (Mt. 20:34), and on those who had nothing to eat (Mk. 8:2).

Even when "compassion" is not used, he holds on to people and says, "Don't cry . . . don't be afraid . . . don't worry" (Mk. 5:36, 6:50, Mt. 6:25-34, Mk. 4:40, Lk. 10:41). The parable about the Good Samaritan was all about compassion for the man left half-dead by the side of the road. The loving father had compassion on his prodigal son. Jesus felt compassion rising up from his deepest physical parts and the emotions that rose up within him came from those inward parts.

You know what I'm talking about – your gut feelings! I am talking about the stuff that rises up in you when you know something is right OR wrong! It's an impulse that comes from your entrails! Jesus' heart didn't just bleed. Everything within his entire being hurt when he witnessed the suffering and oppression of "HIS" people.

The hymn *Love Divine, All Love Excelling* says it best: *Jesus thou*

art all compassion, pure unbounded love thou art, visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart! Compassion drove Jesus! His eyes were a witness to his faith! His touch, his words, his presence, his prayers, his teachings, his table fellowship with the oppressed and the poor were wrapped up in his compassion!

While John was baptizing people for the repentance of their sins, Jesus set his sights on healing and forgiving people. He took them by the hand or laid his hands on them, although he apparently used only saliva and no special incantations or invocations of names. He touched people. His healing prayers were spontaneous and heartfelt. They didn't come out of any book.

But, it was not the prayers as such that affected the sick, the lame, the hurt and the hopeless. **It was "faith" that made the cures come to pass.** Time and time again, Jesus encountered people in need and said, "Your *faith* has made you well . . . Your *faith* has healed you."

Faith, like a mustard seed, is small and apparently insignificant, but it with faith, mountains can move (Nolan, p. 38). Faith is that very strong conviction that can take a person who is sick and turn them around to healing. If you say, this prayer won't make a difference, it won't. If you say, I believe in God and the power of God working in me to heal, great things begin to happen. The conviction of faith AND hope and the attitude of both mixed together begin to change one's outlook and one's disposition.

This is Jesus speaking, not me, although I agree with him 100%! When Jesus sent out the disciples two by two, it was to awaken faith in an atmosphere of fatalism. Miracles happened when there was a shift from fatalism to faith and from hopelessness to hope.

I can't tell you how many times in my lifetime, I have seen people overcome immense odds because of their faith! They have risen to walk when they were told they would never walk again. They have stepped out of comas because of all their faith and the faith

surrounding them. They have beaten the prognosis on cancer because they believed the life that was in them was meant to continue on, way beyond the doctor's death sentence. Jesus knew this in his time and empowers us for ours to have faith in our healing walk.

Albert Nolan writes in *Jesus Before Christianity*:

“His one and only motive for healing people was compassion. His only desire was to liberate people from their suffering and their fatalistic resignation to suffering. He was deeply convinced that this could be done and the miraculous success of his efforts must be attributed to the power of his faith. . . . What he wanted to do most of all was awaken the same compassion and the same faith in the people around him.” (Nolan, pp. 43-44).

Finally, Jesus was compassionate and he healed people through the power of faith, but his “praxis” was driven by forgiveness. Jesus had folks come over to supper. He knew that when you were relaxed and enjoying a good dinner with a sinner, good things happened!

Just as sins were debts owed to God, forgiveness meant the cancellation of one's debts to God. To forgive meant to release, remit and liberate. To forgive someone from the sins of their past, meant to let it go, to overlook it, to take away its power from the present moment.

When Jesus befriended sinners and spent time with them listening to their stories, he made it clear that's what he had in mind. To change a prostitute to a person, he threw a party. To change a tax collector to a disciple, he passed them a dish with tabooli. To change a drunk to a sober man, he passed him the cup with unfermented wine.

The power of forgiveness, like the power of healing, was the power of faith. When Jesus forgave people, they experienced relief, joy, gratitude and liberation of love! The Pharisees and other religious leaders were scandalized by the power of Jesus' forgiveness and its

direct impact on people's lives. Jesus' joy, cheerfulness, faith, hope and love were all infectious. That's where Jesus differed most of all from John the Baptist. While John fasted, Jesus feasted. While John preached fire, Jesus made folks feel safe and secure. As I said Wednesday night, they started together. But, I also told you they ended up on different paths.

In the end, Jesus not only healed and forgave people, he also dispelled their fears and relieved them of their worries. His very presence liberated people (Nolan, p. 51).

As come to Christ's table of grace, may you see him here – welcoming you in the midst of your brokenness and sins. May you feel his joyful, cheerful, healing, faith-filled presence in the immensity of his love and grace. May you experience his compassion, his healing, his forgiveness as you pass the bread and the cup, remembering him and knowing that he is present with us in this very room at this very moment. Amen.