

Isaiah 35:4-7a

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:31-37

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The Rev. Bradley C. Dyche

There are many bruises and bumps in the process of becoming an adult. When I was in college at Texas Tech University, I suffered a certain crisis. My last girlfriend had just broken things off, and I, as you might well imagine, was confused in more ways than one. Needing consolation, I found myself at a friend's apartment in a not so great neighborhood. And yes, there are, some seedy, sordid, spaces in Lubbock, Texas. But as I walked in the door, the phone rang. My friend answered and began what I could foresee would be a lengthy conversation with her Mother. Did she not understand that I NEEDED attention? I decided to go for a walk. Craving solitude, I walked down an alley and arrived in an old rickety park. The grass was brown and overgrown, and the equipment was worse. The merry go round was not so merry as it went around. In fact, with each movement, it squeaked in ghastly, ghostly high pitched tones. And although there had probably been many swings on the set originally, there was only one remaining, and it hung assymmetrically from its chains. When I sat in its cradle, I somatically matched my inner, spiritual lopsidedness.

I attempted to swing, compensating for the odd angle. As I went back and forth wooshing through the air at varying degrees, I longed for the easiness and unawareness of youth. Suddenly, though, I began to notice a man crossing the park. The sun shone in my eyes, but I could still see this shadowy figure approaching. He hobbled a little, but walked strongly. I did not know whether to leave or run. I just continued to swing, but the man kept walking toward me, could not understand that I wanted to be left alone. Finally, he approached, and from his clothing, I could see that he was probably homeless. He clutched a pizza box in his hands. I was full of fear, but I simply said, "good evening." He looked me up and down, sensed something was not right, and asked me why I was so sad. This man who had nothing was ministering to me.

The man then looked me squarely in the eye and motioned to his pizza box. "Here," he said, "you need to eat. I got this for free. They always give me any wrong orders over there." He pointed to a neon sign flashing, "Domino's Pizza." Then, the man said that he was on his way to a Salvation Army shelter. The man opened the box. The pizza looked hot and fresh, an irresistible smell to a college student, and the gentleman would not take "no" for an answer. I took one slice. I ate from the hands of a man who had nothing else to give. I was a vegetarian at the time, but I ate pepperoni pizza. Before I knew it, the man turned and walked away, and in the distance, I saw my friend running out to me. The encounter was over as quickly as it began. I have never felt so humbled or grateful for a simple gift of kindness as I did that day.

If ever I were to redesign the sacraments of the church, I would call that pizza baptism AND communion because in those moments I learned more about God than a sprinkling with water could ever teach. No longer did I think of God as telling me what to do. No longer did I feel like God was interested in judging me for who I am. I felt instead that God was right there with

me, always walking up to me offering an abundance and humility that were and are life-changing. That is what I would like to talk about today: how the giving of ourselves and others sharing of themselves with us is how we bring of the love of God to the world. It seems particularly important as we start the new journey of a school year together, change seasons, and commemorate the events of five years ago.

Our reading for today from the Letter of James says, “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights... In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” The message holds a great deal of truth. For how we interact with the world is extremely important to our faith. Most times, I would say that how we live out and not how we confess our faith is our faith. And as James says, our actions, our giving and being open to the love of God, are the first fruits of God’s plan for this world.

Jesus shared the same message in our Gospel reading from Mark, but in a less direct and more convoluted way. In that reading, we hear about Jesus healing a Gentile, a blind and deaf man in the region of the pagan Decapolis. It is an account of Jesus’s healing ministry that seems, at the outset, to be quite amazing and miraculous. And it is wonderful that we see it that way. But to really understand what Mark was saying and why he included this story in his Gospel, we have to understand that if we were first century Jews hearing this account, we would probably be appalled instead of overjoyed. Jesus was, after all, healing a Gentile, an outsider. And Jesus touches him, with his own saliva, his bodily juices. Such an act would have been a violation of codes of purity of the time. This would have been a scandal. And secondly, and even more importantly, Jesus heals this Gentile just as pagan magicians would have healed the man. The way that Jesus heals this man is the same way that a magician would. Hence, we have Jesus in an outside land, with outside people, using outside methods to heal. And this is right after the account that we heard last week in which the Pharisees attack Jesus and the disciples because they fail to wash their hands before dining, as the Jewish codes would have demanded. These passages would have shocked first Century denizens, and we have to understand that.

Many theologians and believers have questioned why Mark would be so insistent on showing Jesus as disobeying the rules, healing Gentiles, acting like a Pagan magician instead of the Jewish man and messiah that he was. And the answer that seems the most salient to me is that Jesus was trying to get the people around him to question what the true sign of the Messiah, the son of God, would be. For first Century Jews, which the first Christians were, the Messiah would have been someone who upheld the laws and someone who most certainly did not act as a Pagan Magician. But Mark, instead, shows Jesus disobeying those understandings. Any why? Because for Jesus, the only important part of being the Messiah is giving of himself, sharing of himself, sharing his kindness with others, humbling them and us by his presence in our lives. And we know that because just as important as these stories are, most importantly, the climax of the Gospel of Mark is the account of Jesus being willing to give everything he has, even his last breath for kindness, for forgiveness, for good, even in the midst of evil. In Mark’s Gospel there is really no account of Easter and the Resurrection because for Mark, Jesus giving of himself is everything.

The fact is, the only reason that man in that park had anything to give was because someone at a Dominoe's Pizza took a wrong order, and gave it to someone in need. That homeless man also had somewhere to sleep that night because people cared at the Salvation Army. That enabled him to give, and his gift to me enabled me to see beyond my own pain and begin giving to others and even myself again. This is the cycle that we as humans have. If we keep giving out of or even responding with defensiveness, hostility, or even violence and abuse, those are the things that will hover, influence, and eventually implode our world. Those are the chain of events that we could create. But if we give of ourselves, we start a different chain, a chain beginning with people long ago, culminating, I believe, in the life and death of Jesus, and continued through every act of kindness that we or anyone else ever share. Our first reading from Isaiah says that there will be a time when "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. I want to say that Isaiah here is talking about those chains of events and a time when those chains will connect and create a new beginning for us. And as we start this new venture of a year, a season, and time together, we get the opportunity to also begin a new chain, a new chain that will allow us to live into the love of God through this our parish and through our lives.