Proper 16

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By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

The way that Gospel literature makes use of ailments can be problematic. “Blindness” is often used as a metaphor for ignorance, words like “paralytic” are used, and — in this week’s gospel reading — a person who is impaired is described as a “cripple” who has been “bound by Satan”.

The experience of illness or impairment can be one thing. The further experience of experiencing other people’s language about you, attitudes towards you, and descriptions of you can be an entirely other thing. It can cause deep conflict to hear yourself described in ways that you would not choose to describe yourself.

Language is a power, and like all powers, if it has integrity, it will withstand scrutiny. In today’s gospel reading we hear about the language of protocol, the language of description, and we can see how language choices can deepen conflict. Further, we can see that challenge — and Jesus was not uncomfortable escalating conflict through targetted challenge — can cause shame, protection, learning and life.

Text

Luke 13:10–17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.

When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?”

When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Comment

The stage for this week's lectionary text is one filled with conflict. Jesus is teaching on the Sabbath and a person with an ailment appears. Jesus heals her, and while cure is being enacted, conflict is also engaged: the leader of the synagogue challenges Jesus and their words ring out in the immediacy of the woman's recovery. This man in leadership seems to be characterised as a spokesperson for other opponents of Jesus.

One of the first things to recognise is that Jesus, in this text, is not avoiding conflict. At other times he does, telling individuals to keep their miraculous healings secret. But here Luke's Jesus engages in a public disagreement with another religious figure, each using the bible to make reference to their point of view.

It can be something that plagues congregations and denominations: what do we do when the Bible seems to say two different things? Or, to put it a different way, what do we do when people's readings of religion lead them to different conclusions about what is right and wrong? Both men here are making claims to biblical devotion.

Before exploring the voices of the two men in this text, it's a good idea to turn to the woman. Hers is the only body that is described. She is described as being "bent over and quite unable to stand up straight". Who was she? What was her name? What was her work in the world? Where did she live? How often did she attend synagogue?

We know that — by the end of the text, when the showdown is over and the opponents of this healing have been shamed — the crowd rejoice with her.

The drama, then, of public commentary of this woman's body is amplified in a public way. What is it like to have the shape, the story, the experience of your body taken as an "issue" over which people make theological arguments?

Jesus' words are harsher than it would seem. He makes use of an everyday example — Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? — by way of asking him opponents to consider their actions. He is, in effect, saying "You'd treat your animals better than you'd treat this woman, this daughter of Abraham". By his strong assertion of "daughter of Abraham", he is drawing attention to the living, breathing person whose life is being discussed as if she deliberately took part in a theological drama in order to annoy the sabbath.

This challenge is what shames Jesus' opponents.

Shame is an interesting word. This is the only time that Luke uses it in the gospel. Shame, Adam Phillips says in his latest book *Attention Seeking* is a particular form of paying attention to a story. Often, especially these days, when we say that someone is shamed, we mean it in a way that is critical of the shamer. However, the gospels

here highlight the sometimes important usage of shame. When a misuse of power is exposed, those who have been hitherto misusing power may feel ashamed. In this context, some of Jesus' opponents have been exposed as people who'd treat an animal better than they'd treat this woman. Their challenge to Jesus had been public. His response was equally public. They are shamed into realising their need for change.

Others in the crowd are rejoicing.

When public disagreements happen, sometimes a wise imagination is that some kind of "live and let live" arrangement can be arrived at. And this compromise resolution might — from time to time — be a wise way to bring peace.

However, in situations of injustice, a "middle ground" is not what the gospel envisions. Jesus here is not creating a middle ground.He is not suggesting that there's a fence upon which to dwell that sees everything from different perspectives. When it comes to people's lives being abused by powerful people who reward themselves at the expense of others, Jesus' intervention is not neutral and his biblical point of view is not reconciliatory. It escalates conflict. He, a person with a body, seems always to prioritise a moral engagement that begins by honouring the lives and bodies of those who've been discussed without being given their due dignity.

It's often said that shame is a poor teacher. I think that's often true. But I know that I have learnt from times when my own hypocrisy has been highlighted.

Prince of Peace is what Christian prayers sometimes call Jesus. True, perhaps, but this is no easy peace. For him, some things — especially human dignity — call for confident confrontation.

Response

This gospel reading is one that calls for people with positions of power to examine how they use their power to benefit them while not extending that same power to others.

It calls us to consider how hypocrisy is in our lives. Some of us are victims of the hypocrisy of others. Others of us are perpetrators of hypocrisy upon others. Still others of us are in both camps.

Acknowledging hypocrisy — or, even more acute, having it pointed out to us in public — is never easy.

What helps is talking about it. Shame — when it is doing its complicated work — makes us feel like there is only one story about us. Speaking honestly with each other about the experience of recognising our hypocrisies and making changes about those hypocrisies is a building block: it shows us that shame is not the last word, and that justice calls us beyond the practice of hypocrisy to the practice of being in a beloved community moving towards justice.

Prayer

Jesus you don't back down.
You amplify where others seek to quieten,
taking heckles from a crowd and returning them.
May we be our best selves in conflict,
knowing when to learn, knowing when to listen,
knowing when to lambast, knowing when to lament.
Because this woman's life mattered
you knew that, even when others didn't.
Amen.

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Argument and Anger