

Begin Again

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The Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 13:10-17

Text: "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD." – Jeremiah 1:8

In his book, *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt says we believe we hold a more accurate view of ourselves than anyone. Sometimes the view of ourselves is true; sometimes it is an inflated view. Today I want to talk about the opposite view: when we feel down about ourselves. When we feel that we can't do anything right. When confronted by overwhelming challenge, we dredge up our weaknesses, shortcomings and self-limiting beliefs as reasons for not stepping up to the moment. In our Jeremiah passage from this morning, Jeremiah says to the Lord, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." I am only this. I am only that. "I am only" is a limiting phrase we play over and over again in our heads. It stops us from taking that next step.

So I'm talking about this subject this morning 'cause sometimes... sometimes we all need a little help, right? God never intended for us to be a failure when confronted with something difficult. God wants us to see through the difficulty. See through the suffering. See through whatever hurt we have before us. God wants us to "Begin again." Not once, not twice, but whenever we are presented with an opportunity to "live again" in our life, we should "begin again."

So, let us turn our attention to the Luke passage for this morning. When we read and listen to this story of the healing, the focus of our attention goes to Jesus. That is natural. We are watching Jesus because he is the teacher, the healer that we admire. In Luke 13, verse 11 says "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."

Now what if our attention is put on the crippled woman who was set free, what would we notice? What do you think you would notice? It's kind of hard isn't it because the story doesn't say that much about the crippled woman. The story doesn't appear in the other Gospels, so a quick read of another telling of the story won't help. What we do know is that the woman has a crippling affliction for the last 18 years. 18 years. 18 years is a long time to have a crippling illness. It's long enough to feel like nothing will change. It's long enough to have the feeling of defeat seep into your mind. It's long enough to think that no one cares. It's long enough to think that God does not care. But God does care. All the woman

needed was for someone to show the way to “begin again.” Jesus did so with his miracle healing.

In Jim Wallis’ recent book, *On God’s Side*, Jim Wallis reminds us that Jesus came to bring a new order of living called the kingdom of God. Jesus taught it and lived it amongst his disciples and his followers – actually all Jesus’ acquaintances. Despite all this, we know the disciples didn’t always “get it.” The disciple, Peter, is often the most used example of showing that he doesn’t “get it.” And all of this was when the disciples and followers had Jesus, flesh and blood, with them. Jesus was alive; they could feel his love, right in front of them.

Then suddenly Jesus was killed, crucified by the authorities and buried in a tomb. What did the disciples do? They fled. They hid in fear. They were grieving. They were lost. The disciples did not know what to do next. What they did not do was decide simply to compile all of Jesus’ teachings and try to live by them. There was nothing about Jesus’ teachings that they could remember enough to give them strength, give them the will to move forward.

So here’s the good part... What finally brought the disciples back to life was the excited announcement from the women, who were less afraid than the men and had gone out to be with the body of their beloved Jesus. The women announced that their Lord was not dead but alive! The disciples ran to see for themselves. They could hardly believe the good fortune. And when they met Jesus after his death, they were delighted that their teacher was back to lead them. This is when the disciples began truly to understand what Jesus meant when he said he would give them an Advocate. They began to understand what the Holy Spirit is. And those disciples no longer were afraid. They were empowered to “begin again.” Those disciples fanned out into the neighboring villages, regions and countries. A new movement was born. A new movement that we now call Christianity was born.

So you are sitting there thinking, sure it’s easy for those prophets like Jeremiah, and Jesus’ disciples because God DID talk to them. But when it comes to ME, I’m not hearing God, or God isn’t listening to my pleas for help. Can’t God see that I am dying inside?

We very often have the same problem as Jesus’ disciples had. And it is no wonder. Jesus isn’t physically with us – at least not as a flesh and blood person like you and me. We all know some of Jesus teachings, but in times of trouble those teachings alone don’t help us with our despair and hurt. We lose sight of the real miracle of Jesus Christ. We lose sight of the Easter miracle that Jesus is with us, around us. And we sometimes lose sight that we are all connected by that great Holy Spirit. We lose sight of that small voice, that voice of God, who is whispering into our heart to “begin again.”

Jesus famous “Farewell Discourse” with his disciples can be found in chapters 14 – 17 of the gospel of John. The discourse is filled with love and life lessons. In the middle, specifically John 16, verses 22 – 24, Jesus says, “So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy, so that your joy may be complete. That is from John Chapter 16.

So God does care, God always cares. God always loves us. The failure in communication is not on God's side, but is on our side. Our human tendencies are such that we can be easily distracted from the voice that says, "I care." The voice like Jeremiah heard that says, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you to deliver you." God wants the best for us.

This relationship with the "Living teacher," the living "Jesus Christ" is absolutely essential in keeping our hope alive against all odds that regularly challenge it. The greatest challenge to us in a world of injustice and cynicism is how to hang on to belief in a better world, a world that is better than this one.

So finally let me turn our attention to another key character from the Bible, Saul, one of the more despicable characters in the New Testament. Saul did his best for several years after Jesus crucifixion to snuff out the followers of the "Way." But Jesus, our Lord, the Holy Spirit, found a way to reach through all the layers of hatred to touch Saul's soul. Saul's blindness was lifted and in doing so, Saul became the apostle Paul, thus allowing the despicable Saul to "begin again" as Paul, the apostle of the Way. So, God even cares for those who are despicable, lowly and most disliked.

From his letters in the Bible, we know a lot about Paul and his "begin again" story. We don't know much about the crippled woman who was healed and her "begin again" story. We just know she began praising God. I would like to think there was more to that story. That crippled woman began her own "begin again" story of living a life that was a blessing to all whom she encountered. I would like to think she brought that better world to this world. That story is out there for you, for me, for all of us. So let us "begin again."