



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"A HEALING DISRUPTION (Encounters with Jesus)"

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A number of years ago something unusual happened around our home. While I was in the back of my house working on my sermon, my kids heard a girl scream from down the street. They couldn't tell if it was for real or just some teens goofing off.

So my then teenage son, Caleb, decided to walk down the street to figure out what was happening. A minute later he came running back yelling, "Hurry up. Get outside. It's for real."

At first I thought he wanted me to call the cops and get me to go down the street to check things out for myself. Instead he runs to his room, grabs a baseball bat, and says to me, "Okay, Dad, let's go." With that he turns around and runs out the door.

Now I probably should let you in on something here. When there is a situation that may require baseball bats to bring resolution, I tend to head in the opposite direction. Nonetheless, despite such reasonable thoughts, I knew I couldn't look cowardly in front of my kids, so I run in my room and grab my bat and take off. It was all kind of crazy. We really had no idea what we were going to face.

Well as it turned out, it was not too serious a situation. In fact we were able to bring peace to the situation, and I even began a relationship with that young neighbor that I didn't really know before (and yes, no bats were required).

Of course, after all was said and done, I started thinking, "What's with the whole baseball bat thing? What is his mother teaching this kid?"

I tell you this story because I was a bit surprised by my son's unthinking instinct to help out and do something in a situation where he didn't have the full grasp of what was happening, nor did he know how it would turn out. He just knew he had to move toward the cries of pain and make someone else's cry his concern.

Today as we continue with our Encounters with Jesus series we are going to look at a story in the Gospel of Luke where there was another person crying out for help and how Jesus also moves toward the cries. In this encounter with Jesus we will discover some vital things necessary if we are going to be part of God's work in the world to heal the cries of the world.

To understand this story more in depth lets consider the context of the story.

Luke 18 takes place as Jesus is headed to Jerusalem for Passover. Jericho is some fifteen miles from Jerusalem. This is just a day or two before He would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey with people praising Him as the Messiah (the big whole Palm Sunday thing).

My point is, at this time Jesus' popularity was probably at His highest. People are super-enthusiastic about Him, but unfortunately despite their enthusiasm they still don't seem to fully get Him.

As we just read in Luke 18.35 and 36, Jesus "approaches" Jericho and is walking

with a "crowd." It is likely that this crowd was large, given the fact that this would have been the precise time tens of thousands of Jewish people would head up to Jerusalem for Passover.

So Jesus enters Jericho with a lot of hoopla and then, apparently near the entrance of town, was a beggar. As this man hears this big crowd begin to pass by, he inquires about who has come. He is then told it is Jesus of Nazareth.

With this we see in verse 38 this blind man shouts out to Jesus, "Son of David, have mercy on me." This word "shout" does not mean the kind of shout you may give calling out to a friend. This word means to scream and cry out with an unusually loud volume. In fact, it has the connotation of being a very unpleasant sound.

Ever go to an event or ball game where someone is just a little too amped up and noisy? At first you feel awkward, then you start to get annoyed. It's one thing to cheer with enthusiasm, but it's another thing to sound obnoxious in the process.

Well, this guy is shouting with that kind of really loud annoying yell: "Son of David, have mercy on me!" This reference as Jesus being the Son of David reveals that this blind man sees Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ of God. The Old Testament prophesied that the Christ was to be a descendant of King David. So as the centuries passed, "the Son of David" became a synonym to Messiah.

Part of the point here is that one would not shout out such a thing for the heck of it. The blind man had a clear understanding of Jesus and what His mission was about. His eyes may have been blind but his heart could see clearly, unlike the crowd.

This is where it starts to get screwy for me. Look at v. 39. We see that the beggar gets sternly ordered by the crowd to be quiet. "Sternly ordered" means a strong denunciation of someone. "Be quiet" could actually be translated a little sharper like "shut your mouth!"

This is the reason why I say this gets screwy because how can anyone who has known or heard or seen Jesus over the past three years or even over the past month hear the cries of a blind man (a blind man!) and move to silence and demean him?

After all, Jesus stated repeatedly He came to preach to and love on and embrace the hurting, the poor, the marginalized, the people like this very man! But the crowd obviously failed miserably to grasp that this is an essential part of Jesus' mission in the world. What movie have they been watching all this time? Think about how a little screwy this is. It makes you think who is the blind one here?

One of the things I take away from this is: Spiritual excitement is not necessarily an accurate gauge that we have an accurate grasp of Jesus. Have you ever seen where there was much enthusiasm and excitement and even worship about Jesus, but they failed to grasp Jesus' concern for justice for people on the margins?

For example, how was it that in the 20th century white Christians were not on the forefront of fighting racial injustice? Or how even today we Christians are not on the forefront in the push for men and women to have equal pay in the work place? Or a host

of other issues?

For instance, did you know that in our country, one out of four women will be abused in the US, and that every nine seconds a woman is beaten in America? In fact, four women die each day from domestic violence. Moreover, did you know that from 2001 to 2012 around 6,500 men and women died in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but in that same time period nearly 12,000 women died from domestic violence?

How do we not hear those cries? Think of it. Nearly twice as many women died from domestic violence as those who died in the wars, and we don't hear nearly as much about it.

So my question is, do we Christians hear those cries? Are we on the forefront of dealing with such issues? When Christians are in a place of power and influence and they don't move toward the cries of people, what is going on?

After all, the centerpiece of our Christian faith is to love God and love others. And if we are to love either of those people then justice must be a central concern for us Christians. As one professor who is a Christian put it, "Justice is what love looks like in public."

When I thought about this incident in Luke 18 in light of our greater world, I started to think that maybe this is an intense microcosm of what happens on some level to a lot of people on a regular basis.

I remember when I was in my 20s I was just back in Jersey for a few months after being a missionary in Asia. One day I went to the mall. Now you should know in my area there were very few Asians. So as I was walking through a mall, I saw a woman from India dressed in her sari. As she walked around the mall, a group of teenage boys followed her and made snide remarks. The woman looked hurt, frightened, and angry.

It was absolutely disgusting to see this

(as was the silence and lack of action of other people in the mall). So I stepped in between them all and confronted their behavior. After an exchange of words they left her alone.

Please understand I don't bring this up to sound heroic. I wasn't being heroic, but simply being biblical. No Christian can see something like this and do nothing – that is not an option. Though she was a foreigner and a Hindu it remains a biblical imperative to make her suffering my concern even if she never comes to Christ.

It doesn't matter if people are Hindus or immigrants or immigrant Hindus or gay, etc. We stand up and speak out because "justice is what love looks like in public." And we are called to love. Amen?

Now notice Jesus' response to all what is going on in Jericho. Look at V. 40. Jesus stopped or stood still and ordered the man to be brought to Him. Let's look at that second verb first. It says Jesus 'ordered' people in the crowd to bring the man to Him.

Think about that for a second. Jesus didn't make a nice request, but spoke with strong voice, strong speech. The word ordered means to state something with a force of authority. This was no, "Hey Benjamin, could you ask that guy to come here?" kind of nice request. This was something much more forceful. It was more, "Hey you, bring him over here!"

Why is He forceful in His language? Is there a hint of anger or frustration here? If so, why?

I like the fact that Jesus does not address the blind man directly, but orders the crowd to get involved. I think its because Jesus doesn't just want to heal the man. I think Jesus wants to teach and heal the crowd of their hurtful ignorance.

Now let's look at that first verb in v. 40. It says, "Jesus stood still."

At first glance this seems unremarkable. But think about that for a second. There are all kinds of excitement and noise going on all around Him. Yet despite all this Jesus is attentive and responsive to the voice other people are trying to ignore and even silence.

What a great picture of our Lord. He stops the entire party train to focus on and care for one singular hurting man on the margins. What a great image for us His followers to live into. Think of how our world would change if we Christians did the same to such people. Stop everything in a meeting because we saw that someone was hurting. Stop everything in our busy day to listen to someone suffering. Stop everything to make someone else's cry our concern.

Isn't this what Jesus does in vs. 41-43? Notice "Jesus asked him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' He said, 'Lord, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed Him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God."

Notice what Jesus does in how He treats the man. Jesus dignifies the man others were trying to demean. Jesus makes him the center of His attention in front of the crowd and is completely attentive and focused on this man. You can picture Jesus looking straight at this man with a caring look as He asks, "What do you want me to do?" Then Jesus responds to the man with compassion and love, and heals the man.

The question I have as I read this is: why did Jesus do this miracle in this way? We all know He could have healed this guy across the street. Why go through all this drama of stopping the whole parade, commanding the crowd to bring the guy themselves over to him, asking the guy what he wants (as if Jesus didn't know), and then healing

him. Why do all this?

Often when I hear preachers speak on this section of the passage they say this drama teaches us that we need to be specific in our requests to Jesus and have faith. I don't think that's the point at all! I think Jesus is giving a clinic to the crowd on how to love on people in the margins who have really big problems.

He is saying to them by modeling this: 'here is what you do with such people. Be attentive to the hurting. Give them a voice to express their needs and truly listen to them. This is why I think He asks the man a question, so He can give the man a voice for his pain.

Do you realize that if this man was never given a voice he never gets healed? How much of the pain in our world is perpetuated because people who hurt don't have a voice. And when we don't feel like we have a voice we can become deeply distressed and desperate.

Many years ago while I lived in a refugee camp as a missionary I met a 12-year-old boy. He was hapa – also known back in those days as, Amerasian. His mother was Vietnamese and his father was an American soldier. You should know there were thousands of Amerasians in Vietnam after the war, and they were marginalized by the Communist government.

However, by the early 80s the government was willing to ship them out. So now actually having an Amerasian child was no longer a source of shame, but a ticket out of Vietnam. Unfortunately, in some cases this led to the sale of such kids to make money.

As I said, in 1984, I met this Amerasian boy, and to be honest he was annoying; always seeking attention. I didn't understand until later why he was seeking so much attention. I eventually learned that he often complained to camp authorities "These are not my parents. This is not my mother. This is not my family." But no one paid attention. No

one listened.

In the end, at the age of 12 in complete despair he took his own life. All because no one would take him seriously, no one would hear his cries.

Luke 18 and this boy's story gives great credence to the words of two theologians whom I often quote: "The first condition of healing is to give voice to pain." And "The first duty of love is to listen (to that pain)." That's how the miracles start.

You want to see God's healing power come through your life, then: be attentive to hurt. Give the hurting a voice. Be a deep listener to that voice. And compassionately respond with whatever means God gives you to bring healing to that pain.

Let me drill down on the listening piece because it is so crucial to bring healing. Think about it—why is being heard a big deal? Why does it feel so good to be heard? Or why does it feel so lousy not to be heard?

I think its because not being heard communicates "You don't matter." Isn't that what the people were communicating to the blind man? If that is true, how long can people live well with that? How long can you live in such situations and feel psychologically or relationally or soulfully healthy?

Here are two things you can't hold together: "I value you, but I don't want to listen to you." You will never hear, "Dad really values me, but he doesn't listen to me very much." Or, "My boss really values me, but he doesn't hear a word I say." Those statements will never be put together.

Part of my point is, when we don't value people we will not listen to them. When we don't value people, we will not take them seriously. When we don't value people, we will not give them a voice.

And in not listening to them we may miss the opportunity to provide healing, to provide a miracle of God.

As one writer put it: "Listening is important because it forms bonds between people and reinforces self worth...Listening validates the one you listen to; it affirms them and reminds them of their basic worth...There is nothing more human than our desire to be heard. It is our cry for permission to live."

This is vividly portrayed in a story my friend told me recently (I have his permission to share it). He shared how he was attending a business conference in San Francisco and was walking to dinner with two other business associates on the outskirts of Chinatown. He said he was locked in conversation with the others when he noticed a homeless guy in his early-mid 20s walking towards them. The young man seemed mildly distraught.

The sidewalk was narrow so in their subconscious effort to avoid any interaction these men automatically slid to single file formation to allow the man to pass by as they continued their discussion. A few seconds later my friend said, "I heard a booming voice behind me shout: "I feel so alone!"

My friend said, "I turned to see him standing at an alley entrance facing across the busy street. He was looking at people on the street and had a pained look on his face. And then he shouted loud again, 'Why won't anyone pay attention to me?'"

My friend said, "I stood paralyzed for a long while just staring at him trying to process what I was witnessing and could I dare engage. Eventually I realized no one else seemed to have skipped a beat on the bustling street." I looked back towards my business associates. They had never stopped walking and were now a half way block up the street staring back at me with a

"C'mon, what are you doing" look. Shamefully, he said, "I instinctively spun around and quickly caught up to them. I looked back when I got to the light just in time to see the homeless guy disappear into the alley. It pains me every time I think about it."

I thank my friend for being so candid and honest about this encounter. It's a very vulnerable story. I share it not to embarrass him, but because I think it is a story we can all relate to, including me.

Again remember, there is nothing more human than our desire to be heard. It is our cry for permission to live. Brothers and sisters, no one can experience real love outside of this experience of being heard.

As Christian professor David Augsburger put it, "Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable."

Isn't that exactly what unfolded in this story? Isn't this the kind of thing you see Jesus doing with this man? It is a very sacred thing to be attentive to and be entrusted with someone's cry of pain.

Maybe some of you right now were like my friend thinking "I don't know what I would do?" Let me give you some advice from a woman who also didn't know what to do when she heard the screams of a neighbor: Bring them a bowl of chili.

In the book *Radical Hospitality*, one of the authors shares a story of how one year a man moved across the street from her. She said he looked like Willie Nelson only with less hair. A few nights after moving in, the author heard the man screaming in the middle of the night. In fact, for several nights in a row the screams came. She said that finally she found the nerve to go and bring some simple snacks and food to the man including a bowl of chili.

As she shared a bowl of chili with this man she was able to sit and listen to him talk about a failed marriage and about Vietnam and about his PTSD. In doing this she

noticed that he took a chance by sharing his story with her. By doing so he was asking her 'Can you understand my screaming? Can you accept me and live for a season with my suffering?'

The author then says: "Everything changes when you hear the screams in the night. You can't be the same after that – and if that doesn't make you cross the street with a bowl of chili and a heart ready to listen, nothing will."

You see, when we learn to listen, to really listen, to our world, to our neighbors, to our friends and co-workers and strangers, we will hear screams. We will hear the suffering and pain in the hearts of others. And it can be very unsettling and disconcerting. But that is exactly the point in which the world can begin to change and find healing in Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, if we cannot hear the world's cries we cannot help heal its wounds. And healing can begin by simply offering a listening ear and a bowl of chili or spam musubi, saimin, or whatever you're into. You will be amazed at the miracles God can do through you if you take such simple but courageous measures.

Next Sunday night we will have healing service. Pray about inviting someone. Who knows, maybe we will see a miracle of God for their lives.

I really believe we Christians can bring an end to domestic violence. We can end unequal pay. We can make a huge dent in racism. We can see the miracle of God in all these things and so much more, IF we, like Jesus, make their cries our concern.

May God give you the ears to hear the hurting. And when you hear them, may He also give you the courage to make their cry your concern.