



Daily Meditations July 15-20, 2019

The Biblical readings are taken from the Daily Office in the Book of Common Prayer for Year 1 and written by the St. Stephen's Meditation Writing Team: Dave Boyd, Pat Gillory, Jay Nickel, Bob Reed, T. Cay Rowe, and Carroll Wilson.

Click on the scripture reading for each day to go directly to link.

COLLECT, PROPER 10:

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

The Lost Age of Miracles

Monday, July 15, 2019

Mark 1:29-45

"The whole town was gathered at his door."

It's safe to say that just about everyone is looking for a miracle. Some people who live paycheck to paycheck never blink at plunking down cash in lottery drawings that have only the remotest odds of paying off for them. Casinos count on this propensity as do stock and bond advisers. Others go for the riskiest of medical procedures in the faint hope they will be cured. (And unfortunately, drug companies and snake-oil salesmen know all too well how to draw people toward the glow of magical curatives like moths to a flame. Our friends in the news media do the truth no favor when they speak of such things in superlatives and call everything a miracle.)

In this passage from Mark and the others to follow, we enter into the lost age of actual miracles. Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law. Word spreads quickly. And before long everyone with an ailment real or imagined shows up, much as they still do at El Santuario de Chimayo near Taos, New Mexico. All of which requires me to observe that extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof, and while Jesus may have, in fact, performed miracles, he is no longer around to make those kinds of things happen. Alas, then, if people are in deep trouble financially, legally, medically, mentally, they -- and we -- cannot count on a bolt of lightning from out of the blue to provide them with succor and relief.

The question, then, is this: when faced with such needs, who will help? Who can lend a hand? Who can care? Imagine, for example, there is a large and desperate group of people who trek 100s of miles from their own homes with their small children in tow so that they may escape violence, brutality, and, possibly, death if they remain, and they make their way to the doorstep of the

most prosperous nation in the history of the world. What do they meet there? What should they meet there? Where, one is sometimes forced to wonder, are these other people, these rich people who call themselves followers of Christ?

God-on-earth

Tuesday, July 16, 2019

Mark 2:1-12

"They were all astounded and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this'."

Mark here records an event that occurred in Capernaum -- the curing of a paralytic. But what Jesus says, and what those around him hear him say, has some frightening implications if all we want to do is proof text the Bible, seeking out this or that passage to bolster some prejudice or belief we harbor and can't let go of. Jesus seems to make a direct connect between the sin a person commits and the penalty that person suffers in the form of physical disabilities. Jesus tells the stricken individual that his sins are forgiven and therefore he can get up, pick up his mat and walk away. Really? This miracle and others are all about cause and effect? No grace is involved?

Well, they may have believed that -- and did -- in the age of Jesus, but certainly that can't be what Jesus meant then and what his life and example mean to us today. Modern science and medicine, if nothing else, show us there is no connection between the bad one does and, say, the cancer he or she contracts because of some genetic mutation. Jesus in this passage is talking about his power and authority as God-on-earth. He uses metaphors and examples from his time and the experiences familiar to his audience.

Nevertheless, some folks continue to cite this chapter and verse, among others, to reflect their own needs to judge others by a yardstick of their own making. Would God strike down an airplane full of people to mete out "justice" to one passenger? These verses to me seem to try to connect the dots but draw the wrong picture.

Breaking Bread with the Bad Guys

Wednesday, July 17, 2019

Mark 2:13-22

"Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."

In these passages, Jesus has taken a break to dine and sits with tax collectors and other sinners, and, of course, his coterie of critics, keen on catching him doing anything at all questionable under Jewish law, wonder out loud why he would choose to break bread with the bad guys. And Jesus responds as noted above -- he sits with them and mingles with them because **he did not come to call the righteous but to call the sinners**. It's like that famous criminal who was quoted as saying he robbed banks because that's where the money was.

Except...it appears that there is no universally settled-upon interpretation of this important sentence. The King James Bible, among others, has that sentence reading this way: "When Jesus heard it, he saith unto them, They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners **to repentance**." Now there is a difference in content that is big enough to drive a Mack Truck through. What did Jesus come to call sinners to do or be or perform? Was it repentance? That's it? Or something else? Did he call on them to repent and then act differently or just repent?

Matthew's account of this exchange adds a different twist: "On hearing this, Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'" That sounds more like it -- to me. Jesus the merciful, not the vengeful. In reviewing these verses, I ran across an interesting cross reference to Isaiah 55:7. I quote it here in the King James version: "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

To Do Good Imposes an Obligation

Thursday, July 18, 2019

Mark 2:23-3:6

The Pharisees went out and immediately took counsel with the Herodians against him to put him to death.

Now, they've got him, they think. He has finally delivered to them the last bit of evidence the Pharisees need to get Jesus out of the way. He's cured a man on the Sabbath. 'Tis sinful, they say. 'Tis evil. To which Jesus answers, "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath rather than do evil?" And so we reach the very epicenter of what Jesus stands for and against. He will do good, damn it, whenever and wherever circumstances demand that he do so!

And implicit in this assertion is an important kernel of truth: Not do do good when you can is itself evil. There is that. But there is this too: Many sources quote Cotton Mather, that early American preacher and puritan, as saying that the ability to do good imposes an **obligation** to do it. In other words, if you have the resources to do good but refuse to do it or look the other way, you will be called to account for an evil act of omission. She or he who has the means to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, instruct the ignorant, visit the prisoner, save the children and child-like and refuses to do so is for all practical purposes, then, acting in an evil way, a sinful way.

Surely many of us can recite by rote memory the confession that we say out loud every Sunday. It goes like this: "Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and what we have left undone. ..." (As an aside, if I were running the church, I would have a startling loud bell ring out at the start of this confession and ring throughout so we would be forced to hear ourselves and what we say and could not leave church without it ringing in our ears.)

Allowing evil to exist that might be removed or repelled is not the way God rolls. So, why do we? Who among us is ignorant of the man-made disaster on the American-Mexican border? Who among us doesn't understand the destructive power of just one nuclear weapon? Why do we turn our heads and pretend that we don't know 51 million people are now displaced by armed conflict or persecution, that 90 percent of casualties in armed conflicts are civilians and 50 percent are children, that 1 billion people now suffer from tropical diseases, that 100 million people each year are pushed into poverty because of medical costs, that 1,400 children die each day from diseases caused by lack of sanitation and unsafe water, that 6.3 million children under 5 years of age die each year from diseases, malnutrition, poor health care, and inadequate sanitation, that 57 million children worldwide are not in school? I could go on and on and on, but I won't because we all know. We all know, and we choose to do what? Evil prevails when good people do nothing. What then shall we do?

Turn Your Bibles to Matthew

Friday, July 19, 2019

Mark 3:7-19a

"He went up the mountain and summoned those whom he wanted, and they came to him."

I would argue that it is at this moment that Christianity begins. On this mountaintop, Jesus appoints the 12 as his apostles "that they might be with him and he might send them forth to preach, and to have authority to drive out demons...". But Mark is sure in a hurry here. He scampers from the naming of the disciples with this truncated mission statement right over to another place where Jesus is beset by his doubting family. So, whoa! Let's check out what Matthew has to say about this calling of the 12 because there is a whole lot of meat on this particular bone. Turn your Bibles to Matthew, Chapter 10. This entire chapter is devoted to what Jesus tells his new apostles to do and how to behave and what to expect. I will not print all of it here, but let me give you a taste. Verse 6: "Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, make this proclamation: 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons. Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give. Do not take gold or silver or copper for your belts; no sack for the journey, or a second tunic, or sandals, or walking stick. The laborer deserves his keep. ..." And, so it goes.

Now, it is tempting to get all bent out of shape over the fact that Jesus "selected" or "elected" this group for their worthiness as individuals and what it takes to be one of the elect and so on. Avoid that temptation because what's important here is what these guys were supposed to do. They were to act as the hands and feet and heart of Jesus. And, as Christians, is that not also our call?

What is the Will of God?

Saturday, July 20, 2019

Mark 3:1-19b-35

"A crowd seated around him told him, 'Your mother and your brothers [and your sisters] are outside asking for you'." - vv.2-3

In keeping with many other sentiments, Jesus expresses about family ties, he ignores his family, and declares that his true family consists of "whoever does the will of God." And in keeping with the long disputations over what Jesus meant when he chose one noun or verb over another, we have here a can of worms contained in just a single word: will. What is the will of God? How can it be that serving the will of God or doing the will of God is more important than family? Or fortune? Or fame? How should we live if we want to do the will of God? We don't need to haggle or parse and bloviate. Just turn to page 351 in the Book of Common Prayer where you will find these sentences: "Jesus said: 'The first commandment is this: Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is the only Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.'" Amen.

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