

When Love Overrides the Rules Luke 13:10-17; Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

¹⁰Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.

¹¹And 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.

¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

¹⁴But 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.”

¹⁵But 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? ¹⁶And 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?”

¹⁷When 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.

Introduction

We cannot see through the clouded window who the preacher is who is drafting the manuscript, can't even see for sure if the preacher is doing what was often done in the first century when someone of authority wanted something to be put in writing: dictating to a scribe, who marks

on a wax covered wooden tablet, and who will later copy from that tablet and others onto a long roll of papyrus.ⁱ

In fact, the windowpane of time is so opaque that even if we breathe on it and try to rub it clean, we still can't even tell if the preacher who is doing the dictating is a woman or a man, or how old they are. Some have looked through that cloudy window and thought it was Priscilla. Others thought it looked like Barnabas, or Apollos, or a number of other people.ⁱⁱ

We can't yet see exactly who it was who wrote Hebrews. But there is at least one thing we *can* gather, and I'll use the current pronoun "they" which is nowadays taken to mean "she, he or otherwise."

Whoever the writer is, when their head hits the pillow at night and they close their eyes, they see imprinted on their mind's eye a medium-sized hill: it's not Mount Everest and maybe not even Mount Mitchell, but they see it rising before them as they drift off to sleep.

When they close their eyes to pray, their inner eye is looking toward that mountain.

When they imagine the world becoming what it was made to be, they see the life of the nations with that peaceful mountain right in the middle of all of it.

And when they think about living, and being, and someday dying, they see it all happening as if, hovering in the background the whole time is a benevolent image of that sacred mountain: Mount Zion—

except on bad days, or days when they feel like nobody is listening, or that the world has lost its collective mind. On those days, at those times, they see instead Mount Sinai.

They know well what Exodus 19 said about Mount Sinai, where God's voice was terror and fright and a stern warning of death, and God brought Moses up Mt. Sinai from the Israelite encampment, and God said to Moses:

“Set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Watch yourself [lit. “take heed to yourselves”] not to go up the mountain or even touch the edge of it. Any who so much as touch the mountain shall be put to death... Whether animal or human being, they shall not live.’

“When the trumpet sounds a long blast, then they shall come near the mountain.”

So Moses went back down to the people. And on the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, and a thick cloud on the mountain, and from everywhere and nowhere, a trumpet blast so loud that everybody in the camp trembled.

Mt. Sinai was wrapped in smoke that went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain shook violently.

And the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, and as it did, Moses would speak to God, and God would answer in thunder.

Mount Sinai is a place of fear and trembling and smoke and disorientation, and stern warnings that to get too close would be a grave error, a fatal mistake. As Tom Long has written, “Human beings come to Sinai as perpetually unclean sinners, and therefore the holiness of God at Sinai is a holy terror.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And the preacher whose individual identity we cannot yet know, but whose words come to us in the Letter to the Hebrews, says: you and I don't have to go to Mount Sinai to find God.

Jesus leads us to find God at a different mountain: Mount Zion.

This may be why this sermon was, almost right out of the gate, identified as being written by Paul: because Paul had already mentioned Mount Zion in the letter to the Romans,^{iv} when he quoted Isaiah 28, when God said to the contemporary leaders of Jerusalem,

Because you [faithless leaders] have made a covenant with death
and have decided to take refuge in lies,
and have sought shelter in falsehood,
God says:
See, I am laying [for my people] in Zion
a foundation stone, a precious cornerstone, which is this:
“One who trusts [in me] will not panic.”

And maybe that’s why this was called a Letter to the Hebrews:

because the Jews would have remembered Mount Sinai as the mountain where the faithful tremble in fear and terror, and Mount Zion as the place where those who trust will never be made to panic.

So, the preacher writes to the early Christians:

Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24

¹⁸You have not come to something that can be touched,
a blazing fire,
and darkness,
and gloom,
and a tempest,
¹⁹and the sound of a trumpet,
and a voice whose words made the hearers beg
that not another word be spoken to them.

²²But you have come to Mount Zion
and to the city of the living God,
the heavenly Jerusalem,

and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,
²³and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven,
 and to God the judge of all,
 and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,
²⁴and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant,
 and to the sprinkled blood
 that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The Sermon

One person says:

“We live in a time when the good faith of peoples is doubted more than ever before. Expressions throwing doubt on the trustworthiness of each other are bandied back and forth....

We cannot continue in this paralyzing mistrust. If we want to work our way out of the desperate situation in which we find ourselves, another spirit must enter into the people....

We must approach them in the spirit that we are human beings, all of us, and that we feel ourselves fitted to feel with each other; to think and will together in the same way.”^v

Another person says:

“We don’t disagree any more [than we used to] on issues...ideologically or on the policy.

Where we’ve pulled apart is our feelings about each other—that we dislike each other more, not that we disagree on the issues more, and that the president said [that] what brings people to Washington is their love of country. And I think that’s fair. But we may love our country, but we don’t love each other. And that’s the bigger problem.”^{vi}

That latter quotation was from an editor named Amy Walter, a panelist on Meet the Press, speaking off the cuff in the broadcast on June 18, 2017.

The first quotation was said in a radio broadcast by Albert Schweitzer in 1958.^{vii}

So, I don't know: is it just me? Does there appear to be a growing acceptance of cruelty in the world? Does it feel like, among many—even among many claiming Christian discipleship—does it feel like apathy toward human suffering is becoming not only acceptable, but fashionable? Even laudable?

Maybe, maybe not. Albert Schweitzer's and Amy Walter's quotes were made six decades apart and in some ways are practically interchangeable. The good news may be that it's always been this bad, but that would be the coldest of comforts.

But one piece of evidence that grabbed my attention some time ago was a snippet that you can find on Youtube of a 1980 debate between Republican presidential candidates Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, where, first of all, as competing candidates they appear to have been models of civility toward one another—imagine such a thing—

and even more stunningly, each one forcefully makes the case for reversing any whiff of inhumanity in this country toward undocumented immigrants from across the southern border and their children.^{viii}

I'm not making a case for how anybody ought to respond to that politically. I'm not even making a left or right observation. Whether you look at that and go, "Oh, boy, those were the days" or you go, "Listen to those two liberal snowflakes, Bush and Reagan," conservative or liberal, think what you will about their exchange. That's between you and God. What strikes me more is:

Listen to how they talked about other people, desperate *people*, foreign *people*, racial-minority *people*, undocumented *people*.

And it feels like it's been a long time.

Meanwhile, on another side, we seem to be living in a time of a politics, including interpersonal politics, of *personal destruction*, where now more than before, it is deemed acceptable, even applauded, to seek to destroy a person's life and livelihood and family when one aspect of what they think or say, or how they vote, is seen as enough to make them utterly unacceptable and carelessly expendable.

To be sure, some things need to be called out that have for far too long not been called out, and that has been to society's deep shame. There is some past behavior that is still hurtful and unacceptable and shameful, for which a statute of limitations is crushingly unjust to the victimized.

At the same time, writers, thinkers, advocates and activists from both sides of the aisle and all over the map are commenting that the instinct for carnage—for total destruction of a person in retaliation for one perceived unbecoming act, statement or viewpoint—is getting, or is now, out of hand.

Civil correction seems to have given way, in some circles, to an appetite for wholesale personal destruction.

And one may be understandably concerned that all of this cruelty, apathy toward the suffering of others, and destructiveness may increase a sense of hopelessness in people of goodwill.

Today, Luke, and the liturgist behind Psalm 71, and the writer of Hebrews are reaching out through the eons to remind us that the vast goodness of God is not just different from our world of cruel apathy and destructiveness;

but God's vastness is immeasurably vaster than our smallness;

and God's goodness is inconceivably better than the world's—and your, and my—evil, careless, cowardly, casual cruelty;

and God's love is profoundly stronger than love's true opposite, which is our apathy.

God's strength and power and might are on full, terrifying display at Mount Sinai, proving to those who will see that God the Almighty, the Eternal, the Omnipresent Creator is not to be trifled with.

And Jesus says:

Yes. But is *that* what you think this is about?

She appeared in the synagogue when Jesus was there. Maybe she was there every week. Maybe she was there every day. Maybe she had never been seen there before, but had heard about this man who not only *could* bring healing to people, but by all appearances very much *wanted* to.

No matter how active or inactive or invisible she may have been before, she'd been carrying around this condition for 18 years, bent over and entirely unable to stand upright.

It remains unrecorded whether she thought she would come to find Mount Sinai, or Mount Zion.

What she found was a synagogue on a sabbath day when Jesus was there.

He healed her, and for the first time in ages, she stood up straight.

But then a different kind of brokenness, a different kind of not being able to stand upright, made its own appearance in the synagogue.

The leaders complained because the rule says you aren't supposed to do work on the sabbath.

Seriously? I mean, there's a technical justification for what they said, but...

Seriously?

According to Luke, what bothered Jesus enough to go off on the leaders who had decided to make this moment of healing more about a violation of the rules than about the love of God for a human in pain,

was not the blatant goofiness of interpreting a holiness law in such a way that you wouldn't help someone as soon as you could, because that would fall under a preposterously overreaching interpretation of what constituted "work."

What bothered him more primally, according to Luke, was the hypocrisy.

Easy for them to point to him and say, "Look how you violated the clearly delineated rule." But all he did was lay a healing hand on a person in agony. They themselves do more work than that every sabbath day when they water their animals.

In other words:

it appeared that it was much easier for them to see what he,
 who had recklessly brought the power of God's love
 into the sanctuary,
 had done "wrong," because it violated the rules,

than it was for them to see that they not only apparently just missed—
 didn't even pick up on—

the presence of God's active, life-improving love,
but that in focusing on him and how he violated the rules,
they embodied a cruelty toward a woman who had been suffering
for 18 years.

They literally said to Jesus: why didn't you just wait till next week some time? Why didn't you even just wait until tomorrow, when it would be more appropriate to the rules?

Which says to the woman:

We don't care what's crushing you, because it isn't crushing us.
Which makes it irrelevant to us.
Which makes you irrelevant to us.

I imagine that the preacher of the Letter to the Hebrews reads that story and says, "Those hypocrites don't even deserve Mount Sinai, let alone Mount Zion."

But Jesus is here. And when Jesus is here, it's all about Mount Zion.

So, yes, they got the tongue-lashing they deserved. And look what happened:

"Jesus said, '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?'

"And 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."

Nobody got zapped or executed like they would have at Mount Sinai.

They were simply ashamed. Humbling, yes, but surely they had to admit that what they did to her—and what they didn't seem to mind never having done *for* her—was, in fact, kind of shameful, right?

And what was the consequence for those errant synagogue leaders? Did the people rise up and destroy them? Were they mentally or physically harmed?

Were they dragged through the mud, forced from their jobs, humiliated along with their families?

Were they caged and separated from their children? Were they imprisoned and fined? Were they shipped off to a country where gangs and hunger and certain death awaited them or their families?

No. When Jesus is there, it's Mount Zion. The story culminates with the synagogue leaders chastened, but alive and well, and the entire crowd rejoicing at all the wonderful things that Jesus is doing.

On the first day of school at Minneha Elementary in Wichita, Kansas this past week, an 8-year-old boy named Christian—no one has ever been more worthy of that name—noticed another 8-year-old boy whom he did not know, off in a corner, sitting on the ground before school started, crying.

Christian is an African-American kid and Connor is white. Connor is also autistic, but Christian didn't know that at the time. Autistic people are susceptible to being overwhelmed by a lot of activity going on around them, and that's what had happened to Connor.

Connor's mom later said, "I fear every day that someone is going to laugh at him because he doesn't speak correctly, or laugh at him because he doesn't sit still or because he jumps up and down and flaps his hands."

Christian went over to where Connor was sitting on the ground and crying, and said something consoling, and then he took Connor's hand, and helped him up, and they went to the front door of the school with the other kids, and waited together, hand in hand, till the bell rang and the door opened up and the school day began.

I think it's pretty great that a kid named Christian has the wherewithal, and the heart, and the guts to go over to somebody who's not functioning well and say something consoling, and grab his hand and walk with him and then stand there for as long as it takes before the door opens up.

Right now, an eight-year-old kid is teaching a lot of people like me, who spend most of our lives thinking we're worthy of the name, what it means to be called Christian. Maybe even giving those of us who need it a healthy opportunity to be just a little bit ashamed.

Asked about it later, Connor said in his eight-year-old voice, "He was kind to me. I was in the first day of school, and I started crying, then he helped me, and I was happy."

It's just not that complicated. It's not that complicated to be Christian.

His Mom, sitting on a couch next to Christian's Mom, said, "It doesn't matter color, it doesn't matter gender, it doesn't matter disability, and it doesn't matter anything, just be kind, open your heart... it's what we need in this world."

Christian's mother said, "One act of kindness can change someone's life," and Connor's mother said, "It can change the world."^{ix}

The vast goodness of God is not just different from our world of cruel apathy and destructiveness. God's vastness is *immeasurably* vaster than our smallness. God's goodness is *inconceivably* better than our meanness. God's love is *profoundly* stronger than our apathy.

So today, let's join that crowd at the synagogue, rejoicing in all the wonderful things he is doing.

And let's once again humble ourselves before God at that beautiful vision of Mount Zion.

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ⁱ Lemaire, Andre. "Writing and Writing Materials," in David Noel Freedman, ed., Anchor Bible Dictionary Volume 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 999-1008.

ⁱⁱ Harold W. Attridge, "Hebrews: Introduction," in Wayne A. Meeks, ed., The HarperCollins Study Bible (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 2250

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas G. Long, Hebrews [Interpretation commentary] (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 137

^{iv} Romans 9:33

^v Albert Schweitzer, Peace or Atomic War? (Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1958)

^{vi} Amy Walter, (National Editor, The Cook Political Report), Meet the Press, NBC-TV, broadcast live on June 18, 2017

^{vii} Broadcast from Oslo, Norway

^{viii} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsmgPp_nlok or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkkSNMVCwKA>

^{ix} Morgan Mobley, <http://www.kake.com/story/40954091/photo-of-8-year-old-boy-reaching-out-a-hand-goes-viral>