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Lent 4A

St. Chrysostom's Episcopal Church | Chicago, IL

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It cannot have escaped your attention that I have sort of a WAY that I usually write a sermon. Every preacher is more or less the same: he or she reads the lesson—more or less carefully depending on the week—and then tries to find a way to illuminate the text, or to let the story of Jesus leap off the page. Some Sundays this works better than others. And, it probably makes sense that preachers tend to preach the same way. I tend to think in terms of stories, and so I often place a story from my life or the life of the church alongside the story of the text—in the hope that the two stories might shed some light on one another.

But, for some reason, this story of Jesus healing on the sabbath didn't fit into one of my normal preaching shapes. Instead of a story, I kept coming back to these strands or these themes in the text that stood out to me—almost like miniature essays that leapt off of the page when I read the scripture.

So, today's format is going to be a little experimental—like a sermon but jazz.

Bear with me.

Theme number 1: Courage

Can you believe the courage of this man who was born blind? His parents leave him for dead on the side of the road, begging for everything he has. And his community—many of whom are religious leaders by the way—walk right on by and ignore his most basic needs. He sits in filth when those who have known him since he was born exclude him from all the benefits of belonging to a tribe.

And, somehow, through his wiles and his grit, he perseveres—until he has that earthy encounter with Jesus at which his sight is restored. I'm sure you've heard in sermons before that, for most cultures, in most of history, physical impairment is coupled with a community belief that the disorder is connected to some sin—either the individuals or his family's. And so, the people around this man are treating him as cosmically damaged goods.

And when he shows up at the temple, healed of his affliction by Jesus, these people are STILL skeptical. They STILL think that something must be wrong, because he was healed at the wrong time (the Sabbath) and by the wrong person (Jesus).

And this is where the man's courage comes to the forefront. He gives an extemporary sermon and makes a sophisticated case for why he will follow Jesus. He even stands up to his parents, who have been awful to him for his entire life. I love the image of this man—still covered in dirt from the street—coming into the

pristine temple and giving the leaders a huge piece of his mind. This man—in my head, he’s a young man, but the text doesn’t really say—brings with him a courage that I admire and is part of what I think the church is here to learn from this scripture.

Theme number 2: Transgression

I will not be the first to point out that Jesus, though in many ways an observant religious man of his day, always preferences human suffering over religious rules. Which does not endear him to the priests, of course. What I take from Jesus’ transgression is that our call is always primarily to the alleviation of human suffering and secondarily to the rites of the church.

The author even does something really sneaky in the text, and I’ll be curious if you caught it. *The one who sees the most clearly is the one who was born blind.* And the ones who are having a hard time seeing what is right in front of them—God—are the ones whose eyes work just fine. Jesus has worked, not only a transgression by healing on the day of rest—but also an inversion by bringing grace, not inside the Temple with the holy ones, but instead outside in the dirt with the beggar and outcast.

Jesus doesn’t mind breaking rules—pretty large ones—to heal. But I believe that healing is also teaching, for us and for the church. Jesus transgresses so that we

will have a chance, these many years later, to likewise reorder OUR priorities. If we look at our lives, our businesses, our church, our school, our families, our social lives, our spending—will we find the kind of Jesus values that we find in this story? Transgression is not for its own sake—it's for the sake of the one who is healed as well as for those of us for whom this story is itself a kind of healing of our disordered priorities.

Theme number 3: Cruelty

I cannot spend time in this text without seeing the cruelty of the parents, the priests, and everyone walking by. They knew this kid. They knew his family. It is hard for me to imagine that taking proper care of him would have been hard.

But they were scared. And as those of us who have a bit of grey hair on our heads have learned, most cruelty is born of fear. They feared this man's ailment, worried it might catch, worried that he had a demon, worried that his family was sinful going back generations. They were ignorant, and they were cruel. But I think we mustn't be too fast to think that we do not have the same kind of capacity for ignorance and for cruelty. Because of course we do. Lent is the time when we try our best to look these things directly in the eyes and to turn back to following the way of Jesus.

Theme number 4: Praise

When this man is healed, he gets on his knees and praises God. And I know for a fact that this kind of healing is available to all who ask—maybe not in this exact fashion, but I know that there’s nothing in the soul that we cannot bring to God in prayer. And, when we feel that healing—at altar, at font, in community, or in art—it is incumbent on us to drop to our knees in praise. The only response to God’s grace is praise, and if this healed man teaches us nothing else, let it be that.

And, that, my friends, is a curious little sermon built on four themes that stood out for me in the story: Courage, Transgression, Cruelty, and Praise. Maybe your sermon would look different, but I hope that this one helped you enter the story, wrestle with it a bit, and continue to challenge the tenants of your faith. That is, after all, why we retell the great stories of scripture. Let this man be for us a sign of all that God is, does, and will be now and forever. Amen.