

“Jesus And Some Good Trouble”

Rev. David Gregory

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Easter 6

Readings

John 5:1-9

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Soon another Feast came around and Jesus was back in Jerusalem. Near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem there was a pool, in Hebrew called Bethesda, with five alcoves. Hundreds of sick people—blind, crippled, paralyzed—were in these alcoves. One man had been an invalid there for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him stretched out by the pool and knew how long he had been there, he said, “Do you want to get well?”

The sick man said, “Sir, when the water is stirred, I don’t have anybody to put me in the pool. By the time I get there, somebody else is already in.”

Jesus said, “Get up, take your bedroll, start walking.” The man was healed on the spot. He picked up his bedroll and walked off.

That day happened to be the Sabbath. The Jews stopped the healed man and said, “It’s the Sabbath. You can’t carry your bedroll around. It’s against the rules.”



The Pool of Bethesda
James Tissot

“Try Human”

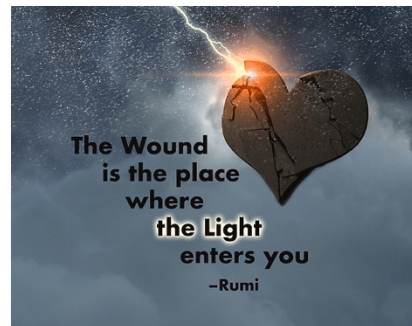
a poem by Chelan Harkin in her book *Susceptible to Light*

Forget perfection.
Go for messy, learning,
tender, whole.

Forget brand new.
Embrace cracked,
broken open, worn,
rich with story.

Forget polished.
Choose rusted,
textured, nuanced, real.

Please cease
this intimidating flawlessness
and become generous
in sharing your sacred wound.
forget Divine—
try human.



Author and religious scholar Reza Aslan has said that it's a miracle that we know anything at all about Jesus of Nazareth. In his 2013 book entitled *Zealot*, he challenges the common notion that the gospels are biographical narratives. Instead he sees them as portraits, like those paintings of historical figures done before the invention of photography.

We have a canvas that invites us to see what the artist sees, and the farther removed the artist is from the actual person, the greater the nuances, the changes of texture. There may be a vague recollection, or in some cases the recollections of others to describe something. And so I have taken to calling *portraits* these works entitled Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, along with the many other gospels of varying origins, like the gospels of Thomas, of Philip, or Mary Magdalene. Do these portraits contain descriptions and actual teachings of this person we know as Jesus of Nazareth? Perhaps, but it is impossible to be certain, and it's better to consider the likelihood that these portraits are "actual" rather than insisting on being certain.

Some people would say that this approach is subjective. I would say that the artist is a master of subjectivity. He takes a few puzzle pieces and connects them with what a face may have been like, or a few broken shards of pottery and paints the vase as it might have been. This is what it means to read the Scriptures through the eyes of faith, to find greater comfort than ever in their uncertainty, and to allow them to create a gallery of understanding or enlightenment that deepens our ideas of what it means to walk by faith and not by sight. It's called *living in the questions* and being thoroughly nourished by them, rather than demanding definitive answers in order to be satisfied that we really know Jesus.

Over many centuries, the Church has done its best to categorize, systematize, and compartmentalize what it thinks it knows about Jesus. Add to that a myriad doctrinal and ecclesiastical systems, and you end up with a major world religion that bears little resemblance to the simplicity of the words "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself." Now there's a puzzle piece that I can take hold of and paint my own portrait around.

We live in a world that does not value simplicity. The more complex things are, the fewer and fewer people there will be who understand them. Simplicity implies something that is available to all. Complexity breeds exclusion and control, while simplicity empowers everyone in equal fashion. And so this portrait we call John gives us a glimpse of how doing something as simple as caring for the disabled—or immigrants or refugees or the unhoused, to name a few—can bring us into conflict with political and religious systems that are sometimes invested in the complexities of control. The simple idea that no child should go to bed hungry can at times engender complex arguments over SNAP benefits. The idea that health care is a right seems simple enough, until those who make it a privilege create the complex systems of control that keep it from happening.

Love your neighbor as yourself. These simple words brought this person named Jesus into conflict with the systems of his world. We see a portrait of someone who was messy, who colored outside the lines; one who ruffled feathers, who irritated the people in charge of the complexities. And when he healed someone on the sabbath, he broke all the rules. In turn, the man who was healed followed him in rule-breaking. In his exuberance, this formerly disabled man with his new-found strength and ability to walk, picked up his mat and carried it under his arm, horrifying the rule-keepers who insisted that this amounted to "work" on the sabbath. See what happens? Unless we get control of this, everyone is going to be healed on any day of the week, and somehow we can never let that happen!

There is often a clash between love and human systems based on political and religious control. It is a loving thing to make our schools and grocery stores safer and less prone to the gun violence we have grown to expect. It is a loving thing to relate to other human beings with empathy and care, to see ourselves in the other, to bear one another's burdens and to share another's joy. But it takes some surrender to a bit of rule-breaking, or the ability to find oneself in "good trouble" like the late Senator John Lewis. When love and religion collide, eventually love wins—maybe not today or tomorrow, but definitely before all is said and done.

In poet Chelan Harkin's book *Susceptible to Light*, the poem "Try Human" invites us to be messy and to surrender our excessive need to be flawless. "Go for messy, learning, tender, whole," she says. Rather than divine, "try human." We are a people committed to finding the Divine within all people and all things, and seeing that spark of divinity within each other invites us to being fully human. It's called incarnation—"Emmanuel," "God with us," the human body as a temple of Holy Spirit.

Any spiritual aspiration that does not make us more human can never be divine. Using a portrait of Jesus to wield power or control over those who are vulnerable can never come from a godly place. "By their fruits you shall know them," which is another way of saying that their actions will tell you who they are. You can believe them. As Mary Oliver said, "Tell me what is it you plan to do with this one wild and precious life."

I say don't worry about being perfect. Make it messy, make it creative, make it human. On the sabbath or on any other day of the week, do what you can to heal the world—one person, one creature, one tree at a time. There's only one rule that is never to be broken, and it's called love.

