

“Divine Madness”

Rev. David Gregory

January 13, 2019

First Sunday after Epiphany



The Man With the Withered Hand
James Tissot

First reading

Mark 3:1-6, 20-21, New Revised Standard Version

He entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.”

Second reading

Maybe

Mary Oliver

*Sweet Jesus, talking
his melancholy madness,
stood up in the boat
and the sea lay down,*

silky and sorry.

*So everybody was saved
that night.*

But you know how it is

*when something
different crosses
the threshold — the uncles
mutter together,
the women walk away,
the young brother begins
to sharpen his knife.
Nobody knows what the soul is.*

*It comes and goes
like the wind over the water —
sometimes, for days,
you don't think of it.*

*Maybe, after the sermon,
after the multitude was fed,
one or two of them felt
the soul slip forth*

*like a tremor of pure sunlight
before exhaustion,
that wants to swallow everything,
gripped their bones and left them
miserable and sleepy,
as they are now, forgetting
how the wind tore at the sails
before he rose and talked to it —*

*tender and luminous and demanding
as he always was —
a thousand times more frightening
than the killer sea.*

What is this thing we call the Bible? In most of the churches I have served over the last thirty-five years, there's been a great big one sitting on an altar table, signifying that we have grown out of the great Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, no longer dependent on an authoritative church to tell us what God thinks about us. Thanks to Mr. Gutenberg and the amazing technological advance of the printing press, I can now hold the sacred writings in my own hand. The equivalent in our day is biblegateway.com, where I can look up any passage in just about any known translation at any time that I am connected to the internet. The whole point of it for Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and the other Reformers, was that the Bible could now be in the hands of the people, to be read, understood, and interpreted for

themselves. Information that had previously been given only to a priestly class was now available to everyone.

I used to ask a doctor what was wrong with me, and now before I do that, I can type my symptoms into a Google box and then consult with my physician, skeptically at times, confronting him with what I think I already know. The availability of all of this medical information over the internet is a good or bad thing depending on whom you ask. The Bible in the hands of the masses was a good or bad thing depending on whom you asked.

What is this thing we call the Bible? It looks like a book, but it isn't really. It's a library—actually two different libraries, one Jewish and one Christian. The Jewish library which we brazenly call our “Old Testament” has thirty-nine books on its shelves, with sections for law, history, poetry, and prophecy. The Christian library has twenty-seven books, including twenty-one letters, four portraits, one historical narrative called the *Acts of the Apostles*, and a prophetic-dream piece called the *Apocalypse or the Revelation*. Why does this matter? It matters because of this quest we are on in the new year, to find out what we mean when we say we are following Jesus. People mean radically different things when they use language like this.

What do we mean by it? Do we follow Jesus at all, and if so, which one? The carpenter's son who seemed more like a rabbi? The healer who changed people's lives? The insurgent, messianic rabble-rouser who angered everyone from the Jews to the Romans? The divine Son of God who paid for the sins of the world? Over the last two thousand years or so, people have been choosing one Jesus or another as their Jesus—the one true Jesus, to the exclusion of all the other Jesuses. And in the last two hundred years or so, with all manner of printed Bibles in hand, people have been divided into camps about what that all means. Is the Bible a book that God wrote? If so, then every single word is authoritative and literally true. Is the Bible a collection of books written by human beings? If so, then we need to understand as much as we can about who these people were, their history, their situation, and how their experiences fit into the over-all history of the world. But neither one of these approaches can necessarily explain the main thing we want to know here at the Community Congregational Church in 2019, namely, what difference does any of it make to me right now?

The incessant arguments between conservatives and liberals is not helpful. Maybe you've noticed that in other arenas lately. Is it a wall or a fence? Is it vitally important or is it immoral? Theologically speaking, we're like the government workers who might be saying right now, “Why does it matter? I just want to buy some groceries.”

Today's readings are meant to bring us out of the angry wave where everybody loses and nobody wins. Remarkably, it takes the poets to do that, one writing under the name of Mark, and another named Mary Oliver, who bring us not a liberal or conservative argument, but instead the language of the soul, rich with metaphor as each tries to find a way to express the inexpressible—in this case, Jesus as mad man. Brazenly, Mark says, Jesus walks into a synagogue and breaks the law. He heals someone on the sabbath. His family says to him, “Have you gone insane? They're going to kill you!” Mary Oliver talks about his “melancholy

madness,” when he becomes “something different that crosses the threshold,” causing the uncles to mutter, the women to leave, and the young boy to sharpen his knife. Whatever Jesus we’re in search of, he isn’t someone overly worried about preserving the *status quo*. He seems more interested in getting a point across than pleasing either his opponents or his family. And the point comes across in his actions more than his words. He didn’t stand in the synagogue and argue his case; he just turned to the person who needed healing and did the healing.

It’s not about what we say, you see. It’s about what we do. It’s not about which creed we subscribe to; it’s how we love. It’s not about our church tradition, our denominational situation, or what we think we want to look like to the rest of the world. It’s about what we’re doing to heal each other and the world we live in. Would we dare to break the rules to do that healing? Would we risk angering ICE in order to heal the wounds of those who’ve been cast aside as “others?” Would we speak our truth to white supremacists, anti-Semites, and Islamophobes by treating minorities with love and respect and treating Jews and Muslims as worthy of having their own traditions? Love compelled Jesus to heal someone even though it was the sabbath. Love compels us to heal the wounds inflicted by our culture wherever and whenever we find them.

We don’t know a whole lot about Jesus from the history books. Outside of the gospel accounts, we have scant mention of a messianic figure named Jesus who was executed by the Romans. So while the quest for the historical Jesus might tickle our intellect, it won’t do anything to alter the way we live, and because of that, I would say that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. It’s not about our creed or about our theological position. It’s about what we do. Early followers were simply called people of “the Way,” meaning the way of life. The first followers of Jesus were compelled not by dogma or doctrine; they were compelled by love. Their lives were not characterized by what they believed, but by what they did. I am reminded of the words from the gospel of John which should always ring in our ears:

*By this shall everyone know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another.*

Love will lead us to do some crazy things. Not everyone is going to understand. Let’s not argue about it. Let’s just do something.

Amen.

