

Don't Look Away!

I had been an ordained minister for several decades prior to a time when I had an unsettling experience that left me feeling that I had done harm to another person. It was unintentional but just the same, it was harm.

It was at a women's retreat in late August at a church camp in Central PA. 8 or 10 of us shared a cabin and on one occasion I found myself alone with one of the other women, someone a bit older than myself. We were changing clothes, probably after swimming, and suddenly I realized that the other woman was showing me, deliberately and intentionally, her scars from a double mastectomy following breast cancer. It was obvious that she wanted that trauma and heartache to be acknowledged by me. It was an intimate and vulnerable invitation on her part that clearly said, "please see me. acknowledge me. Care for me."

I am ashamed to say that I looked away, uncomfortable and ill at ease. I knew the right response, but I failed to meet her need to be seen and heard and cared for. I did not extend the hospitality of that space that she desperately was seeking.

The memory brings me pain even after all these years, and I have rehearsed in my mind more than once what I wish I had said and done. You know what that's like. Over and over again you think of what you desperately wish you had said or what you wish you had done. If only... why didn't I say or do the right and noble thing? But in the end, you can't change the past. All that's left to do is to trust that God's redeeming love can make something out of your failure to act or speak in the way you wish you had.

I think of this incident now and then as I find myself these days identifying with that woman's need to be seen and heard in the places that most bring pain and grief in my life. A relationship I have held dear for decades has been changed forever. Because of that, I feel some days like I'm carrying around an open, bleeding wound that while not visible to others still brings grief and pain. Like that woman, I long for others to know and understand the depth of suffering I carry and yet I wonder if, when I share, they will look away as well. This woman's experience leaves me pondering what it means to really seriously show hospitality to others. What does it mean to show hospitality in an organized formal way like a congregation should ponder? But also, what does it mean to show hospitality as individuals, in the ways in which we all have opportunity to offer in our daily lives?

It seems to me that one important aspect of the idea of hospitality is a simple acknowledgement of the universal longing and yearning we humans have to have someone listen and truly understand the deep pain and struggle that we are going through. It is a rare and precious gift to be seen and heard in the reality of our complex, jumbled, chaotic, and messy existence by another human who cares. To be surrounded by persons who say, with genuine compassion, "I see you. I hear you. You matter to me."

I think that of all the stories of Jesus's ministry that I love most, it's those moments where he does just that kind of caring that captivate me. It's often in the midst of tense scenes where the

religious leaders are trying to trap him and nail him as a Sabbath violator that he defiantly chooses to see and hear the most vulnerable person in the room. He *does not look away* in uncomfortable moments. Jesus sees the vulnerable, marginalized people around him, and they matter enormously to him. He brings them right back into the center of their communities and regards them as beloved in his sight.

Let's take a closer look at the story read from the gospel of Mark. This is one of my favorite scenes of Jesus because it shows him at his courageous best with respect to the religious rulers. Jesus has barely stepped through the door of the synagogue when he notices the man with a withered hand. But as focused as Jesus is on the man before him, it's clear from the very start of the encounter, that all eyes of others in the synagogue are on Jesus, not on the man. Mark writes, "they watched him to see if he would heal the man so that they might accuse him." The religious leaders have their eyes on Jesus waiting to accuse him of breaking the sabbath law if he heals the man.

Jesus, however, doesn't have his eyes on the leaders at all. We assume he knows what's in their hearts. Jesus only sees one person in the room. He sees the person in need, and he calls him forward. I imagine Jesus never taking his eyes off the man but intently looking at him. He's likely gazing into the long experience of the man who perhaps has dealt with this disability all his life. He's thinking about how the man has compensated for this challenge. How's he's been frustrated. How he has wished and hoped and longed within his soul and body for two functioning hands. How he came with no expectation of anything changing in his life, and now all eyes are on him. What will this Jesus do, he wonders? What does he want from me?

For his part, Jesus knows what's in the hearts of the religious leaders. He challenges them by asking a question. "Is it legal to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" I really want to know how long Jesus let the silence go on before he healed the man. Did he wait on the leaders to respond? After all, what could they say? Were they about to answer "yes, it's legal to do harm. And yes, it's legal to kill on the sabbath?" Hardly!

It's interesting to note too that the gospel writer portrays Jesus' emotions here with powerfully strong language. Mark, the storyteller, recalls that Jesus looked around at them with anger and was grieved at their hardness of heart. In fact, the Greek word for *anger* is most often translated as wrath, especially in the book of Romans where 10 times, Paul mentions the wrath of God, the judgment of God toward sin. And he uses this word. Here in Mark's story, Jesus felt intense anger.

The verse goes on to say that in addition to feeling intense anger, he was grieved. That word is not used anywhere else in all of the New Testament. The theologian Ched Myers*, writes that this description and the use of the word, *grieved*, is unparalleled in all of scripture. It powerfully describes the depth of Jesus' emotion at seeing this man suffering because of the leaders' stubbornness of heart.

Well, it's just a simple problem, they likely thought. According to sabbath law, the man doesn't qualify for an exception of healing. He doesn't even get a pass into the free clinic. He isn't in danger, because, for example, he hasn't fallen into a pit and needs rescuing like a beast of burden. If so, that would qualify for some action on the sabbath according to the Law. No, this man can just wait until another day when healing fits into the rules. When the healing clinic is open for business again on the right day.

In fact, this whole tense scene could have been avoided, according to Andre Trocme*, because Jesus could have just healed the man in private. He could have noted the man's presence, bookmarked it in his mind to seek him out after synagogue worship, and take care of it on the side. But instead, he chose to force the issue. Under the glare of media lights, so to speak, he performs an act of religious civil disobedience, suggests Andre Trocme. Well before civil rights heroes and heroines who chose to break laws in order to raise awareness of justice and equity, Jesus chooses to make a scene here. This is risky hospitality of a person in need. This is costly love in action. This is Jesus causing himself deliberate discomfort and danger. All for the purpose of providing this man the care, wholeness, and full restoration to his community that he needed. Now he can be a person able to fully contribute in ways he couldn't have before.

Jesus challenges his followers to a level of hospitality that goes beyond smiles, beyond a sign out front that says, "all are welcome", goes beyond a handshake, goes beyond name tags. All those are good and important ways of saying welcome, but they do not take us very far when we are invited and challenged to welcome those whom it's not popular to welcome. Those we're being told we should fear. Those about whom some say we should really be suspicious. Those about whom laws are being passed to keep us away from.

I've seen plenty of congregations back off from the edge of being truly hospitable to their neighbors when they began to see the personal cost involved, the sacrifices demanded, the changes that look frightening. Loss of members. Loss of reputation in the community. An influx of strange, new kinds of people. It was simply too much, and they slammed the doors shut again and went back to life as usual. They just liked being comfortable and happy and all getting along, keeping the peace, enjoying one another.

But I've also seen other congregations that decided that the cost of not living into a radical disrupting hospitality that's desperately needed in our times was too great and it was worth disrupting the status quo. It was even worth losing some long-time members in order to welcome those who had never known a loving church family and were eager to find love. It was worth walking through radical changes in worship style in order to provide a place of welcome, even learning a new language or two and singing in it, of all things! It was worth having to redo the budget, cut back on expenses, be creative with stewardship and the use of the building space in order to open their lives to a whole new kind of faith community experience. The glorious glimpse of God's beloved community was worth having the tired, familiar past become transformed. They stopped looking away from human need and never looked back. They began to look at their neighbors and notice the potential gifts hidden within them. They found among

themselves a new joy at being part of whole new future they could never have envisioned before.

These are congregations with vision statements easily memorized like “we are called to be a Christ-centered, multi-cultural church in the inner city, sharing the love, healing, justice, and peace of Christ.”

They are congregations with vision statements they are living into like “Creating Community Inspired by Christ by Welcoming Unconditionally, Transforming Lives, Serving Courageously, Glorifying God, and Building Resources”

Radical hospitality all starts where Jesus started in this story. By not looking away at need and opportunity. By being willing to be inconvenienced and made uncomfortable. By being open to being disoriented. By giving of ourselves in ways we hadn’t been stretched to do before. By even displeasing the keepers of the status quo among us in order to enable liberation and justice to happen.

Well, that’s easy for some people, you might say, because they’re just adventurous and extraverted. That’s true. It was certainly true of my mother. She had trouble not looking away when she saw the need of another.

There are a few phrases that were often said about my mother. Phrases such as “She never knew a stranger” or “She could get a brick wall to talk”. The stories of how she made new and treasured friends out of perfect strangers on our two family vacations from Pennsylvania to Alaska are the stuff of family legends.

Up until her death at age 84, she was still demonstrating that she had a way of noticing people, of reaching out to engage them, and of forming relationships that ended up lasting a lifetime. Take, for example, the encounter she and my dad had with a German couple they found standing at the south rim of the Grand Canyon.

There my parents and an aunt and uncle were at their car in the parking lot, getting prepared to head down the Grand Canyon, hiking from the south rim to the north rim. As they gathered their gear, they noticed a couple standing nearby looking terribly dejected, hats in hand. They kept noticing them looking distressed until it became too much for my mother to bear and she went over and asked, “What’s the matter? Can I help?” They told her how they had come over from Germany to tour the US and had planned to hike across the Grand Canyon. They had all the necessary gear and supplies they needed to head down the trail. They just didn’t realize they had needed to make reservations with the US Park System in advance. Reservations, they were told were a requirement to head down to hike the whole distance. They didn’t know what they were going to do. They had no Plan B. Their life-long dream was being crushed before their eyes.

Well, it just so happened that for some reason my parents had two extra reservations with them that they didn’t need. They were hiking with a brother and sister-in-law but a party of 6 had originally been planned. Two people at the last minute couldn’t come along. Would this couple like to hike with them? *Would they like* to hike together? Of course they would. They set off down the trail together, talking and sharing the stories of their lives together. For

the next thirty years my parents and Gerhard and Marianne Mueller stayed in touch across the ocean and visited in each other's homes. It all started with a simple matter of noticing the pain and distress of another. It offered a way of transforming and reframing the sad story into a very **joyful** story that set them on the journey forward.

Well, I wish I could say that in this respect I'm just like my mother, always noticing the needs of others and jumping up to see what I can do. But I'm still a work in progress as far as it goes with not looking away at the need of another. Maybe God still has some work to do in you too.

It's my hope and prayer that I will find ways to offer better hospitality toward others like the woman I encountered in my opening story. I wonder if I can honor her need and longing by noticing those on the edges around me. You'd think I could, given that I spent years living as a foreigner in the Dominican Republic. While not exactly a person with little power, I was part of the minority of white foreigners there, working as mission staff for my denomination in the country for almost 8 years. Even though as an American expatriate I went with significant personal privilege, relatively speaking, I experienced what it is like to feel vulnerable and on the outside, not initially able to speak the language comfortably, dependent on others to find my way around. I was inspired by the gracious, kind, patient Dominicans who cared for me as a newcomer. They modeled what it is to not look away but instead to notice the needs of a stranger. So, when I see someone on the edges, I hope I will always try to remember and attempt to reach out. I hope I will be able to do good and not cause harm.

A contemporary Jewish rabbi, Danya Ruttenberg, has defined *perfect repentance as that moment when a person has the opportunity to commit the same harm that they had previously committed, but they make a different choice, instead.*

*They make a different choice because they are a different person—one who has done the deep work of understanding their problematic choices and the harm they have caused. They have become someone who cares about not causing harm.”**

It's been about 25 years since the incident I described. In what way can I address this harm done so long after the fact?

While I can no longer find the woman I described to address my failure directly, I can keep doing the work of personal transformation toward becoming a person who consistently sees and hears and acknowledges the vulnerable ones in my midst, a person who responds differently when given a choice. A person who allows God's Reign to grow and multiply in my life. We can all commit to that personal transformation that is then expressed in the communities we're a part of.

I am so very grateful that, as a prayer I love goes, “What we have been, is past; what we shall be, through Christ, still awaits us.” May it be so for us all by God's good grace.

References:

*Quote from Ched Myers – Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus by Ched Myers

*Quote from Andre Trocme, quoted in Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus by Ched Myers, referring to Trocme's book, "Jesus and the Non-violent Revolution"; p. 162

*Danya Ruttenberg, quote from her blog on Substack - <https://danyaruttenberg.net> – See also her book, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*