

August 21 2016 Sermon at Circle of Mercy
Marc Mullinax
Luke 13:10-17

"HUMANS IN THE EYES OF A MERCIFUL GOD"
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There are at least two famous dreams in the literature I read regularly. The first one is from ancient China. "Chuang-tzu dreamt that he was a butterfly, fluttering here and there, carefree, unaware of a Chuang-tzu. Then he woke up, and there he was again: Chuang-tzu, beyond a doubt. But was he Chuang-tzu who had dreamt that he was a butterfly, or a butterfly now dreaming that he was Chuang-tzu?"

The reason this dream fascinates us is that we like a clear dividing line between the dreamer and the dream. But that is not in the logic of dreams. What if the dreamer and the dream are, in the truest and best stories, the same? Let's see...

You have heard the gospel that Beth has read, which contains the phrase, "When Jesus saw her..."

These words that Luke uses seem like a throwaway clause, really. "When Jesus saw her..." could mean, "Once upon a time, Jesus did not see her, and then he did." Jesus has this coming-to-awareness moment. It has to be quite the moment of compassion. Noticing. Seeing. Awareness. He saw her. He got his eyes full of her. She entered him, and that was the game changer. And I warn you, it's now gonna be spiritual mayhem and social chaos.

What do we know about this woman? How does Luke know she had been bent over for 18 years? Did Jesus know that? Had Jesus been frequenting this unknown synagogue since he was a teenager, and seen her sideways-L-Shape stooping over a bit more each time? Had he seen her? Had he noticed her before? In this story he does, and the story takes off.

Had she seen him before? Maybe. Maybe seen him grow up in some serial and occasional fashion. Getting weaned from his family. Gathering some men and women about him. Becoming some ragtag itinerant prophet, who were a denarius a dozen back then. Nothing special about him, to her. Until this day. And she noticed him, too. And the story takes off. They've got each other by the eyeballs.

I think she had seen him before; his face was perhaps a common sight. Jesus must have been a known quantity to her, a non-alien and non-alienating presence in this synagogue. Otherwise, she would hardly have allowed this man approach her. This time, he notices her, and this time she allows Jesus' gaze to break through to something she might never have wanted to acknowledge: being healed, and all that THAT meant. And here comes the mayhem and chaos. In one very

tightly packed sentence, all heaven breaks loose – *When Jesus saw her, he called her over. “Woman, you’re free!” He laid hands on her and suddenly she was standing straight and tall, giving glory to God.* Look how every action is revolutionary. (If you need to blink, do it now.) Jesus sees her, calls her over. She goes. He announces she is free. He lays his hands upon her. She stands upright. She praises God. Whoa! Seven miracles all bunched up.

However, until there’s a *noticing*, the stories of Jesus and this woman are at a standstill. They will not interact in this synagogue/spiritual/special/sacred space until they notice each other. Then all-heaven breaks loose upon their strong culture of constraints and contrasts. Beliefs about insiders vs. outsiders, men vs. women, married vs. unmarried, honor vs. shame, clean vs. unclean ... beliefs are strong, and maybe the first freeing up is both Jesus and the woman getting thrown clear from their own beliefs by this spiritual nitroglycerin ... this combustible noticing. Conventional thinking takes a much-needed vacation. No more divisions based upon *fors* and *againsts*, *bettors* and *worsers*, *insiders* and *outsiders*. You see, the hallmark of this conventional thinking is, If you are healthy, you deserve health’s blessings; but if you are stooped over, knocked over, [blanked] over ... well, you’ve done something to deserve it. Blame that victim ... it’s a convention still with us. But in this all-heaven-breaking-loose moment, conventional thinking plays no part.

Which, for this woman, getting shot free of conventional wisdom is blessing enough. Growing up and getting stooped over in a blame-the-victim culture had to have been a bullying day-to-day spectator sport. Perhaps starting with any family she had, but most certainly lost, I see her isolated, for years. I see her getting up each day, more accustomed to her stance, her stoopedness, more and more conditioned that something in her past had made her deserving of this public shame, more isolated, more abandoned. The perfect prisoner of belief, in which what mattered were people’s outwards, and not their innards. And maybe she was actually believing that story. Aren’t cultures, & not so much people, still the real bullies of our day?

Jesus had his culture, too. An interlocking network of do’s and cannots, sins and non-sins, clean and unclean, with different standards for each gender. These made it well-nigh impossible for *anyone* to see this woman. So let us acknowledge the first miracle of this story is *she is actually noticed*. [I could go on a tear right now about who is visible, invisible, outed and passed over, in our day and time, and how a bullying culture enables who gets noticed, and who matters. I’ll let you finish this thought for yourself.]

Then Jesus touches her. O...M...G...! *Did you see that?* Touching is important. No, it’s everything. Isn’t it ironic that the woman, perhaps a frequent visitor to this synagogue, never, in her dreams, thought she would be touched there? For when she came to synagogue, it was there she was most reminded of her untouchable condition. Remember a few minutes ago when we passed the peace. Some touches were good & welcoming, and some were perhaps, if you are like me, a bit awkward? We remember touching. We notice it. It’s increasingly litigious. If I touch a male or a female at Mars Hill, well, I dare not initiate it. There’s a whole bunch of taboo layers,

behind which some law-abiding person is just waiting to spring out, point to me and say, “*J’Accuse!*” And my 16-years at Mars Hill will be over, forever tagged by that one illegal touch.

Jesus, somehow, spins free from this culture of “taking names” and lives into his dream of humanity. He sees this woman, touches her, and she starts to see herself as ... well, as already freed. For she does the last thing anyone – including herself – imagined her doing: she stands straight and tall, and gives glory to God. She had pretzeled herself into a paralyzing and pious posture of what was not true. Jesus saw her as what she already was, an unbound daughter of Abraham. She was already free, already blessed, already and originally a miracle.

Let’s get one thing straight, church. Blessing is original; it is not an option. Unfortunately we link original and sin together way too often and call that – somehow – good news. I’ve never understood the logic as it was presented to me ... That if we just hate ourselves enough, maybe God will at last see and love us. How is that good news?

But when the conventional stories of our original ... messed-upness ... gets in the way of God’s original story about who we really are, then brothers and sisters, it is time to change paradigms, and celebrate the actual noticing of human beings. Because humans in the eyes of a merciful God are all the story ya need. It’s all ya need to know. All ya need is love. Nothing needs fixing; we just need to get back in touch with the mercy that got us here, the mercy that notices us, and the mercy that staightens us up. We do not – repeat, not – need some catechism class in which the questions about the sinner I am alleged to be dictate the Answer, and that – *miracle of miracles!* – Jesus is the answer to all my existential questions. The correct question is not so much who do I say Jesus is, but rather, *Who does Jesus say that I am?* My story as a daughter or son of Abraham is better than that catechism, better than what we could ever indoctrinate our selves with. It’s a divine story about humans in the eyeball of a merciful God. We are all Abrahamic descendants. Red, and yellow, black and white, we’re all precious in God’s mercy-sight.

The truth is that the gospel story of mercy is real. No matter what. No matter the unoriginal fears that bind us. No matter the unoriginal prisons that hold us. No matter the closets we inhabit. No matter the latest assessment by peers. No matter the number of weapons. No matter the threat level. No matter who’s at the microphone, or behind the gun, or got you in their sights. No matter if no one really sees you. This is true: Jesus is the anti-serpent in our garden, who notices us, holds out the fruit from the Tree of Life, tempts us to take a bite. It is for this food we are made.

Let me end on a note of hope. I have been through the Baptist ringer much of my life. The Baptist story was a closely argued theological explanation of the distance we are supposed to have created between God and humanity. The guilt of this distance we created can be paralyzing. It all capstoned with me with the most unfortunate King James word that I grew up with: *perfect*.

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. Matthew 5:48. And “Only Jesus is perfect,” I heard these over and over, from kindergarten teacher, to playground banter, even in seminary. My friends and I had these spiritual contests in which we would talk up

and demonstrate how imperfect we were, and yet always nod our heads on how perfect and sinless Jesus was. For 18 years, for longer, I was stopped by and stooped by this *perfect* story. It gave me spiritual arthritis.

And then, I got noticed. In church. Jesus, masked up as my friend who knew his Hebrew and Greek, explained how the word is better translated as “perfected” or “made whole,” even “balanced” and that “be ye therefore perfect” is a kind of spiritual expectation that makes us into perfect ... well, you fill in the blank.

Jesus, God, Holy Spirit, has a dream. God dreams that he, or she, is no longer God, but people. In its dream of humanity, God dreams God’s image in a woman stooped over for 18 years, in a child testing her limits, God dreams with a teenager struggling with life choices, alongside a young man wondering about his attraction to males, and with a young Marc who could never be perfect. God dreams that God is human being, populating the world, suffering what humans suffer, and all the while God is unaware of its deity. Then God awakes and God is God again, beyond a doubt. But is this the God who had dreamed of being a human, or is it now the human dreaming it is God? What a daring act of the imagination! The optic nerve of God! The utter spiritual mayhem: God becoming human, one by one, in every one, stooped over, stopped up, bullied by culture. The real story? We are not just in God’s image, but God is somehow mysteriously in ours. We indulge in the fantasy of our utter difference and indifference to our common peril.

We humans have projected our stuff onto the Universe and called that projection “God.” ... But what if ... WHAT IF... God projects all the divine and godly attributes onto us humans and sees humans as “divine.” God notices this stooped-over woman only because she had already been in God’s dreams. God notices this cancer-ridden young mom only because she had already been in God’s dreams. The people we are going to name in a few minutes in our Call To Prayer are already God’s dream work. God recognizes Godself in us because God has first dreamed us, and we are already perfected, already whole, already a child of Abraham. This is the story that counts. What would it look like to evangelize our world that God dreams us ... Perfect? And the old stories of trying to be perfect are incomplete, stooped, and stupid stories. It is not so much that we must believe in God, but that God believes in us. As in already.

I mentioned two famous dreams. The second famous dream turns 53 years old one week from today. It is also a dream in which things turn into their opposite. Hills become valleys, valleys become exalted, and black and white children hold hands instead of holding prejudices.

From these two dreams, we see all-heaven busting out and earth becoming an inclusive place. We’re all kin now. This stooped-over woman is mysteriously us. She receives on our behalf heaven’s story that she is already free at last, because she is made free from the first. God

dreamed God was a human being, and that dream comes true, over and over again. This is our story. This is our song. That straight story unbends me, uprights me, and I shout, and praise God.

Freedom is what we are made of. For this freedom we are ever set free. Do not submit again to any other yoke of slavery.

Benediction: Claim your birthright. Be healed, even though you have considered the facts. Recommit to evangelize our worlds with this original good dream of God and human beings never alone, and never to part. So say we all? So say we all.



Barbara Schwarz OP, 2014