

Reconsider This Scene

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Mark 1:29-39 ~ February 7, 2021

As a child growing up in New York City, I loved going to the American Museum of Natural History. I can still feel the excitement of entering the giant hall with the great dugout canoe. Sixty-three feet long, hewn from a single Western red cedar tree. Among the artifacts of First Nation Peoples, I particularly loved the dioramas built into the walls, each revealing a little story.

One depicts an imagined meeting between Dutch settlers and the Lenape, an Indigenous tribe inhabiting New Amsterdam, now New York. With European ships on the horizon, tribesmen wear loincloths. A few Lenape women can be seen in the background, undressed to the waist, in skirts; with heads down, dutiful. In front of a windmill are two fully clothed Dutchmen, one with a firearm. The other is graciously extending his hand, waiting to receive offerings brought by the Lenape. The narrative, created in 1939, is rife with historical inaccuracies and racial clichés, that filled the imaginations of children like me. The diarist Anais Nin observed, “We don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are.”

A couple of years ago, as this nation took faltering steps to remove statues and plaques, and rename schools, the Museum made the decision, at least with this diorama, to not remove, cover over, or alter it. Instead, as reported in *The New York Times* (3.25.19), they have made plain how it is problematic. On the glass now are ten large labels that invite the viewer to, quote, “reconsider this scene.”

The labels say, for instance, that the Lenape would have been dressed for such an occasion in fur robes and adornments that signified leadership. Trading canoes would have been alongside the European ships. The women in Lenape societies (past and present) typically hold leadership roles, and would have been central in the negotiations. The story changes with a new lens.

Let’s take that label, apply it to today’s Gospel, and reconsider this scene. During the course of his ministry, at each step of the way, Jesus is calling into question, subverting, or healing, the social structures of his day – in home and village, in synagogue, and town square. Let’s look from Jesus’s perspective, with eyes of God, if you will.

We’re in the little fishing village of Capernaum along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus and his new-found companions go to Simon and Andrew’s house. Entering, with eyes of God, Jesus saw right away that all was not well. The custom was for the woman of the house to greet everyone and pay special attention to a guest, offering to wash his feet, bring him something to eat. This was central for her standing in society.

Before he even laid eyes on Simon’s bedridden mother-in-law, Jesus saw this family’s life unfold before him. A fever could be deadly. Incapacitated by illness, she had no way to contribute, and thus no place in society. Through Jesus’ eyes, it must have looked dire: for Jesus disregarded all manners and the strict moral codes and went straight up to the women’s quarters – where men, especially unknown men, were not allowed.

For Jesus to be in the company of someone sick would render him ritually impure. But looking at her, Jesus could see the fatigue of fever, the fear of loss, the shame of being unable to contribute. Looking with the eyes of God, Jesus sees all of this; he is moved with compassion. The Greek root of the verb “compassion” means viscera, entrails, bowels, guts. With the eyes of God, Jesus doesn’t see just

the surface; Jesus sees with his guts; it is visceral; he feels the full weight and depth of the woman's situation, of this household.

Taking her hand in his, he raised her up – raised being the same verb that will be used in the raising of Lazarus from the dead and the resurrection of Jesus himself. This is no minor incident. We may be dismayed that she immediately got up and began to serve them, but reconsider this scene: she would have experienced this as being restored to a meaningful role in her family and community. He gave her life back to her: her dreams, her future, a place in the community.

Jesus did the same with countless others in that little village. We are given details of the man with unclean spirits in the synagogue, the healing of a leper, and a paralytic whose palette was lowered in to Jesus through a hole in the roof. As with Simon's mother-in-law, all are nameless, all have or are in immediate risk of being cut off, cast out from society. With each, Jesus sees not as the world sees – a leper, paralytic or fevered woman. Jesus sees the whole person and the possibility and promise of their being restored to community.

Take note in this story of the crowds. After Jesus healed in the synagogue, quote, “his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee” – small village, big news. After Jesus raised Simon's mother-in-law, they brought all who were sick; it says “the whole city” showed up. After he healed the leper, he could no longer travel openly. And the paralytic came in through the roof, because they couldn't get him anywhere near the door. Those in authority soon took notice, sent representatives from the big cities. Says biblical scholar Ched Myers, Jesus' healing campaign in Capernaum is a strategic effort to expose and challenge the prevailing power structures – religious, caste, political, and economic – that render so many invisible and outcast.

I've recently learned about the difference between biomedicine and ethnomedicine. Biomedicine is concerned with symptoms and pathogens, disease in the organs. Disease – and its cure – effects individuals. Ethnomedicine is concerned with culturally constructed causes of illness. In the stories of leprosy in the Bible, it's not clear that the sickness described really is leprosy from a biomedical perspective. But from the sociocultural perspective, this condition called leprosy threatens communal integrity and holiness and must be removed from the community. Healing inverts and rearranges the balance of society.

Myers contends that if Jesus were only curing the physically sick and mentally disturbed, such acts of compassion would not raise the ire of local authorities. Thus, says he, these stories “represent Jesus' subversion of the priestly control of the purity code and scribal control of the debt code.” Jesus' healing campaign “brings him into conflict with the authorities.” Think non-violent resistance. That's what this is. Jesus is the model upon which all others will base their actions, up to and including the Rev. William Barber, Jr. and the Poor People's Campaign today.

This is very early in Jesus' ministry. This scene sets a pattern: heal, proclaim, resist, pray – then repeat. At each step, Jesus' action forces a recalibration of the relationships of those around him.

I am wondering about our situation today. We need the cure, the biomedicine; we need the vaccine for ourselves and others. And we need the healing, the ethnomedicine – to repair and restore the culturally constructed causes of illness – brought on by Covid, or racism, or Christian nationalism, or false narratives of meritocracy, or capitalism run amok, and more.

I am wondering too what it was like to travel with Jesus, to be in his company as he moved from village to village. As they watched and listened, walked and witnessed, I wonder if Jesus' patterns

became clear, if the disciples could enter a town or situation and whisper to one another, I'll bet he's gonna' do this – on the Sabbath, with those people.

One of my mentors, Claude Payne, retired bishop of Texas, called upon all churches to become communities of miraculous expectation. I wonder if that's what it felt like for those first disciples – that they became a little band of sisters and brothers, a community of miraculous expectation.

I wonder if we might do the same: look upon the familiar dioramas of our daily lives, then reconsider the scene, with eyes of God, and seek to see as Jesus saw. For, if we see things as we are then... what then? Amen.