

Healing Disruptions
Epiphany 5B: Mark 1.29-39
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It's the approach of Lent—and the preaching series in particular—that's driving home for me that we've nearly completed a trip around the sun since life in Memphis was first interrupted by a novel coronavirus. (That's what we called it back then. Remember?)

By mid-March, we had to shut the series down, and I was disappointed, of course, about the preachers we wouldn't get to hear. But I was also really looking forward to a renovation project in the Calvary nave for one of them.

"Renovation" is a bit of an overstatement, but it got your attention, didn't it? Harry, our brilliant and dedicated facilities manager, found a contractor to install a ramp so that Molly McCully Brown could get into our chancel to preach. Imagine twenty feet of aluminum pipe and plywood ascending in front of this pulpit and turning to reach the chancel right over here.

I realize this might not be a welcome architectural addition to our beloved church. But here's why I couldn't wait to see it. I'd first met Molly in Spain. She was reading at a gathering of authors at a storied cultural center in Madrid where Lorca and Einstein and Marie Curie once lectured as well. But Molly has cerebral palsy, and often needs a wheelchair to get around. Which meant she could not ascend the dais for her reading that day. She had to sit in her chair on floor level, under a looming lectern.

And even if we were all transported instantly to another time and place as she read her astonishing poems about the Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded, I vowed to myself that when Molly came to Calvary, she would preach from the chancel like everybody else. And if she wanted to get into this pulpit, we'd even find a way for her to get up here.

Now, I'll admit that my reaction was as much personal as it was hospitable. Many of you know my mother spent quite a few years of her life getting around in a wheelchair. And my dad was foolish enough to think she ought to be able to go just about wherever she wanted to. So, over the years, we carried Mom across muddy lawns and up hundreds of porch steps and dozens of staircases, like an Indian noblewoman in a palanquin. I'd been close to someone the world wasn't set up to receive before.

A few weeks after the pandemic shut down LPS, I interviewed Molly for the Calvary podcast. And I got to ask her something I'd been wondering to myself for years. It once occurred to me that, to my knowledge, nobody feels sorry for me because I can't fly. Fly as in flap my arms and take off, not book a flight to Seattle. But if the world had been built for fliers, well, I guess you'd put building entrances on the rooftops. And if the world were put together that way, people might ask whether life was even worth living for a poor pedestrian like me, shuffling around way down here so slowly and alone on two feet. So, might some so called disabilities have less to do with what a body can or cannot do than how the world is put together? Or rather, for whom the world is put together?

What followed was Molly's dumbed down, for my sake, description of the difference between the medical model of disability and the social model of disability. The medical model begins with an ideal human body and it does what it can to bring bodies that don't conform to that ideal into alignment with it. Molly was clear that she was grateful for what surgeons and doctors had made possible for her over the years. So, she wasn't dismissing the model. But it's not sufficient. The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics

and Feeble-minded which Molly wrote about was a real place. It was built during the modern eugenics movement, which was started by a half cousin of Charles Darwin named Francis Galton. Mr. Galton thought natural selection implied that some bodies should be removed from the gene pool to make the species stronger, so many of them were put away in institutions and sterilized and worse. It was not as fringe a theory in its time as we might like to think. Nor is it dead.

According to a remarkable article in last December's Atlantic Magazine, prenatal testing in Denmark has meant a 95% reduction in Down Syndrome babies brought to term in that country. The article struggled humanely and honestly, I think, with the agonizing moral and social and personal dilemmas embedded in that statistic. Questions of what counts for normal, and who gets to decide, and what does this mean for those outside the definition, are at least as alive and vexing as they were in Jesus's time.

A social model of disability acknowledges that whether or not a human life flourishes is about a lot more than being able to perform certain physical or mental tasks. Much more important is the sense of being included and acknowledged as a full member of society. Which means society will have made provisions for you. It will have been built with a body like yours in mind.

Some bodies—bodies of colors or genders or shapes or abilities that differ from accepted norms—are deemed inferior and then consciously and intentionally excluded. And systems and structures will incorporate these prejudices and knit them into the fabric of the way things are. But at other times certain people just weren't seen or heard from when decisions got made. And so, people built church buildings with no ill will toward anyone who can't walk up a set of steps. But anybody who can't, doesn't need a sign to tell her that the room at the top of them is one more place in the world that wasn't designed for her.

I think it's crucial to see that it is the social aspect of illness or disability, not the medical one, that Jesus was confronting in his healings. And seeing this may expose the relevance of his ministry for our lives today.

Ched Myers has argued persuasively that if Jesus were simply healing individuals of diseases, there would have been no scandal to his ministry and ultimately no cross. There were plenty of faith healers working in first century Palestine and they were no threat to the health care system, such as it was, much less to the religious and political authorities. But in "the symbolic order"—as Myer's calls it—of Jesus's religious culture, illness was associated with impurity or sin, which cut one off from the community. Lepers, demoniacs, menstruating women, eunuchs... the social norms and religious understandings of all these very different conditions kept the unclean ones separate from the community in similar ways. The conditions may sound antiquated, but they were one culture's expressions of the moral and social codes of acceptability and wholeness every human culture constructs and then organizes itself around.

Jesus's healings were primarily symbolic actions, meant to violate and disrupt the social order of his day. They were challenges to the structures that defined who counts as human, because the kingdom of God has a scandalously different definition of who does.

Look at our gospel today. Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law of her fever. Word gets out, and suddenly the city's sick and demon possessed all seem to be pressing themselves against the door to Simon and Andrew's house. Jesus heals the sick and casts out demons into the night, and he slips away to pray before dawn the next morning. When his friends find him, he doesn't say, "Let's go. I have more sick people to heal. More exorcisms to perform." No. He says, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."

His message is not, "Come to Jesus and you'll get well." His message is that the order of the world is not God's order. And so over and over and over again, he goes to the place or the person or the situation where a seam or a barrier in the symbolic order, the social order, the culture needed to be disrupted so that the reign of God could be seen.

Jesus had a clear message to proclaim. And most of what he proclaimed happened symbolically in what he did. By touching an untouchable. Speaking to a woman or a foreigner or a tax collector or pushing

a child into the middle of bunch of adults who were bickering about places of honor and power to shut them awkwardly up.

And so the scandal building immediately in Mark 1 was carried in the bodies of all those unclean people pressing themselves into Simon's house and following Jesus into towns like Capernaum, where they will dig through a roof and lower their damaged friend to him with ropes. That's how radically he was deconstructing the norms that told some people that they mattered by letting others know clearly that they did not. And messing with what tells some people they matter can get you killed.

To frame it more familiarly, he went directly to the places where you and I might say, "Yes, I know there aren't many of that kind of people here in our church or in our neighborhood or in our club, but they really wouldn't be comfortable here. It's not what they want." Well, those seem to be the people Jesus walked up to and healed so as to pull them in across the boundary that excluded them and say, "Um, whose discomfort is this really all about, friend? Because the boundaries I see seem to have been set by yours, not theirs."

It actually wasn't the ramp to the chancel or the Virginia State Colony poems. It was an essay Molly wrote about being a sexual, desiring self who happened to have cerebral palsy that that really brought home what in me and in us I believe Jesus was challenging and exposing in order to heal. In college she overheard a boy saying he thought she was nice but felt sorry for her because she was going to die a virgin. "This was already impossible," Molly writes, "but all that mattered in that moment was the blunt force of the boy's certainty...what he'd done was...draw a border between my body and the country of desire." The rest of the essay was a shatteringly beautiful and truthful account of navigating that border in the body God had given her and trying to believe that, in spite of the ways the people and structures and cultures and assumptions she lived among would deny it, hers is a body that matters too. A desiring body, worthy of notice, affection, love.

I know that so much of what diminishes Molly in this world is very much alive within each of us, and is in need of the disruptive, disorienting, healing touch of Jesus. Something in us keeps stacking stones back onto the borders Jesus kept pulling down. And maybe for our own healing to happen, it will take following the ones Jesus healed just a little further into their stories. After all, if a lame woman found she could suddenly walk, it was off into the same old wounded and wounding world that she'd travel. A world that would provide her fresh wounds, even if Jesus had healed an old one.

I can imagine her, catching up with Jesus a few years on, speaking to him words Molly once wrote about herself: "I'm still surprised by my own limits, still frustrated and exhausted by pain. Sometimes I still feel suspicious of all my body's sensations, the good ones tangled too tightly with the bad. But not all moments are the hardest ones, and maybe the point is simply this: that I am still alive, still in the business of heading somewhere, still a woman who can stumble, hurt, and want, and—yes—be wanted. That there is no perfect reconciliation, only the way I hold it all suspended: wonderful, and hugely difficult, and true."

To which Jesus might say, "Yes, friend. You are alive. And you are still what healing looks like. It's for the sake of the world that hurts you that I healed you. Keep carrying my message, my kingdom, which you bear in your body, right back into that world until it's changed."