

“Healing through Truthtelling & Stories”

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Truth-telling is healing. Stories are healing. But we have to be careful when we tell and listen to other people's stories. This morning I want to invite us to use caution as we consider the story of Jesus healing the blind and mute. If we do not tell and hear this story well, it causes harm to people with sight or hearing loss.

For example, this story can perpetuate the idea that being blind or deaf is related to sin or “darkness.” Too often “blind” and “blindness” are words with religious symbolism negatively connoting living in a pre-Christian state. Consider some of the words in “Amazing Grace:” “I once was blind, but now I see.” As we focus on the theme of holy vessels this Lent—the idea that all of us are both holy and broken, all of us are in need of the healing touch of Jesus in our lives, we want to pause and consider how purely negative connotations of blindness or muteness can place an incredibly unjust burden for blind and deaf people in our communities, making them into living reminders of humanity's need for “light” and life.

But this story can also be liberating. With some care and attention, and some reframing, this story disrupts and heals some of the harm done to those who are blind and deaf.

Consider this: The blind men in this story follow Jesus *before* not after they are healed. Wow! They know Jesus through means other than sight. Precisely as blind folks, they show marks of true discipleship: they follow Jesus into the house; there, they acknowledge him as Lord; and they confess their belief in Jesus' ability to heal them. They are the first in Matthew's gospel to acknowledge Jesus as Son of David. Evidently, they could “see” something about Jesus that sighted people could not: namely, that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, the one sent by God to bring “light” to the people living in the shadow of death. These men, while blind, have prophetic insight that others did not. In fact, these men are perfectly capable of hearing Jesus, understanding who Jesus is, and acting in ways that express their faith in him, all without the benefit of sight. If the words of God to disciples of Jesus in Matthew are these: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased: listen to him!” these blind men are doing just that! They disrupt prevailing notions that say that God is glorified not in disability but only in its overcoming.

So let us hear this truth: these men are not one dimensional characters. They exhibit an incredible amount of agency all throughout the story, including before they are healed. The irony comes when they are healed and then disobey Jesus' command for secrecy. What do we make of this? Perhaps Matthew wants followers of Jesus to understand that we can still perceive the truth before we have been made whole. Perhaps we should consider that being made whole is in itself no guarantee that one will always obey the truth. Being

healed, in fact, does not turn these men into better disciples. Physical healing is not necessarily accompanied by spiritual illumination.

But let's also cut these men some slack: their failure to follow the words of Jesus here are no worse than other followers of Jesus throughout Matthew—they, too, are very human. They just could not be silent, they had to share with their community the wondrous thing that occurred. Perhaps part of their healing was this truth telling. And their truth is bigger than this one instance. The healing narratives in Matthew represent a bigger truth: that God, in Jesus, has come to heal us all, to bring us all out of the shadows and into the light.

The blind men could speak loudly and yet were not able to see. The mute demoniac could see but not speak. In this way, we understand that we are all faced with certain limits. Understanding these healing stories in new ways expands our understanding of disability. All of humanity exhibits a wide variation in physical and psychological abilities and limits. We can reframe disability not as an absolute or something to be judged as “other” but rather a common feature with which all of us, in our creatureliness, must contend. The limits we all face are not problems to be overcome but a regular reality that shapes who we are and our relationship with others and with God.

Some of us have experienced pain and brokenness related to others telling stories “about us” that create a persona that is not really true. How can we be truly known and understood for who we really are? I think most of us yearn to be seen and heard not in a persona but in authenticity and vulnerability. Reclaiming our “sense(s)” of who we are (being able to see and hear anew) and then being able to proclaim redemptive stories of divine worth about ourselves, is part of healing our minds and spirits.

As we consider, as part of our Lenten focus this week, our mental health and that of our community, let us remember that freedom comes when we can share our stories with honesty and truth. There is still so much stigma around mental illness. And yet each and every one of us have had our mental health impacted by the events of this global pandemic. Some may be experiencing more anxiety or depression or isolation or social inadequacies more than ever. Can we be a community known for its honesty, for sharing how we really are so more people won't feel shame in seeking help and embracing the truth of what they are experiencing so they can find relief?

Rather than perpetuating the unhelpful image that the church is the place for people with their life figured out and all their ducks in a row, can our church be a brave space known for authenticity, healthy vulnerability, and the place to be received, heard, and seen unconditionally? Do we have the vision and courage to think outside the box about ways our church can be a mental health hub for our community?

Let me close with one example to spark our imaginations: Zack Burton and Elisa Hofmeister, both Stanford students, created something called *The Manic Monologues* by bringing together actors and non-actors, writers and non-writers, all to create an evening

of storytelling. An evening dedicated to sharing experiences of mental illness, both of recovery and adversity. Standing ovations followed each performance.

Zach explains: “We received feedback from those brave individuals who shared their stories with us that writing down their experience was extremely cathartic, in some ways liberating.” “One of the storytellers, who was able to attend the performance, came up after the show and shared that providing their story for The Manic Monologues allowed them to open up with a family member who they had not spoken with about their mental illness in many years.”

Friends, the more we are willing to become a brave space where light can be shed on hidden items—what we may feel are taboo—the more we can free ourselves and others with us. As the elegant lyric from the Leonard Cohen’s song, "Anthem" reads: “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” Jesus, the Great Healer and Light of the World, brings healing and hope as we make space for true stories—ours and others—to be told and received. May it be so. Amen.