

Mark 2: 1-12 "Beyond Reality" 6/2/24 Rev, Janet Chapman

It is good to be back with you after my daughter's momentous graduation celebration in New York complete with very vocal protesters, an inspiring concert in Carnegie Hall by church choir composer Pepper Choplin with a wonderful gathering of church colleagues, and two superb Broadway shows. I have had my fill of wall-to-wall people and am now enjoying the open space. I was made aware that for native New Yorkers that sardine feeling is the only reality most of them know and therefore there is nothing unusual about it. Just like existing in summers over 100 degrees on a regular basis is not unusual for us. It often takes stepping out of our traditional comfort zones, out of the norms that regulate our daily existences to come to recognize how deeply we are shaped by our environment. While I was critically aware of the non-stop noise outside my hotel, native New Yorkers wouldn't have heard a thing, but in coming here, they might be unnerved by how eerily dark and silent our nights tend to be.

The very same concept plays out in our beliefs as Christians. Being raised Christian in a nation founded by Christians, my set of beliefs have been shaped more by environment than by scripture. I'm grateful to Brian McLaren for pointing this out in his book, Why Stay Christian?, as he notes that when Christianity began in the early first century, it was known as a way of life, not a set of beliefs. Early Christians were quite varied on their basic beliefs and any arguments about beliefs were based on the understanding of words. The New Testament repeatedly and consistently condemns that kind of obsession over words and points to the higher authority of love, mercy and forgiveness to build up the oneness of the body of Christ versus ego, wealth, and half-truths. The defining factors of being Christian were based on how one lived, how one treated the poor, how one welcomed the stranger and refugee which grew out of a desire to follow in the life and example of Jesus. In order to see this more clearly, imagine if you will, if scientists reduced science to a list of facts. What if scientists stopped being curious, stopped making hypotheses, stopped designing experiments, stopped subjecting findings to peers for review. Instead, they spent their time policing fellow scientists to be sure they remained faithful to their list of conclusions. Science, you might say, would no longer be scientific. That's because the genius of science is it can and must amend

its facts and conclusions on an ongoing basis. Its method helps it sail onward toward greater and greater alignment with reality.

What if the same was true for Christianity? Or contrarily speaking, what if Christianity has become so entrenched in its facts and suppositions that it has become like a huge ship, capable of amazing voyages, but instead has become weighed down by an anchor so heavy that its crew cannot pull it up? It is graced with tall masts and wide sails, a deep keel, and a powerful rudder but by reducing its mysteries to cemented beliefs, by codifying those beliefs and defining itself by those systems, it has rendered itself to be a paradox: a ship that floats but cannot sail. There are Christians who are so convinced that if every other Christian doesn't believe like them, then there is no way they can be Christian. That carries over to politics where people dare to believe that if someone doesn't support a certain candidate, there's no way they can be American; if someone isn't Republican or Democrat, there's no way they can believe in God; and so on. But before we get too hard on ourselves, please realize we honestly learned this arrogance from our predecessors. Rigid belief systems were the foundation of the scribes of Jesus' time. So Jesus countered that system by modeling a new understanding.

Today's scripture is a wonderful example of that model. We are told that among the crowd in the Capernaum home where Jesus was teaching were scribes. There is also a group of friends who dig a hole through the roof, never mind the details of what the homeowner must have thought, and lower their paralyzed friend to the feet of Jesus. Jesus proclaims to the paralytic, "I say to you stand up, take your mat and go to your home." He stands up, takes his mat and goes out, and all are amazed and glorify God, except maybe the homeowner. But in this environment, there are scoffers, those who jump to conclusions and twist what facts they witness into half-truths. Scribes were a small group of literate Palestinians whose job was to keep records, like who owed what to whom, including to the Temple. Their interests would have coincided with the temple officials and other creditors for whom they kept records. Jesus can sense what they are thinking because in this environment being cured of paralysis was directly connected to the forgiveness of sins. In the minds of the scribes, the man's paralysis was a direct result of his sin, so in order to be healed, the man had to go to

the temple, pay his tithe, and then be forgiven. If someone is going to go around healing people outside the temple, that cuts right into the profits. Never mind the fact that as a paralytic, this man would have been dirt poor, unable to make a living, and without a temple tithe, wouldn't have been welcome in the temple to begin with. Questions arise, "Who is this Jesus who forgives sins because only God can forgive sins?" Note that Jesus doesn't argue such words, because he knows the futility of these arguments. There are some people that can never admit they are wrong! Jesus never says, "I forgive your sins;" he says, "Your sins are forgiven." He could have easily said, "God has forgiven your sins." Jesus knew God's heart, he knew the heart of the paralytic, so there was no harm in naming what had already occurred – God had forgiven. And Jesus knew the heart of the scribes looking to entrap him... arguing over words would not change that reality. It occurs to me that this story has more than one struck by paralysis in its midst. The scribes, those who held to rigid rules and judgmental attitudes, were far more paralyzed than the man who came through the roof had ever been.

Our story depicts the ongoing tension which exists even today between new understandings of God's relationship with humanity versus a staunch belief system which maintains the status quo and no longer reflects the facts of our existence. We have not only evolved to recognize that paralysis isn't a result of sin but that healing is more than just physical, it also involves emotional and spiritual aspects. Jesus understood this as he restored the paralytic back to the community, helping him see there is more mercy and love in God than there is sin in himself. Jesus helps him to recognize that no physical reality is ever permanent, but it is always a process of change, of transformation. Yet, the scribes remain paralyzed for Mark seems to ignore them in his concluding statement, "All were amazed." Mark's literary style would have acknowledged them if a change had occurred. It seems to me that we as Christians are in the same danger as the scribes. Christianity has tirelessly deployed belief police to be sure the teachers of the beliefs about Jesus, God, life and the afterlife are following the list required by the records, by the guild who determines who is in and who is out. Maybe we would do better to advocate for a faith that deploys reflective practitioners whose quest is to follow the life and example of Jesus, teaching others by their example to live by Jesus' spiritual method of nondiscriminatory, radical love and courageous

truth-telling. These practitioners, these ship crew members, would be defined by their ongoing quest or mission rather than by the beliefs they hold at any particular moment. This would allow Christianity to become more of an event, active and alive, transforming and moving people rather than paralyzed, unable to sail into uncharted waters.

Craig Dykstra tells a story of a wonderful older woman who housed seminary students while they attended school at Princeton. This woman had a wonderful collection of Steuben glassware, the kind sold on Fifth Avenue in New York. One vase was her favorite but unfortunately, while washing out the remains of tulips from the vase, one of the student tenants accidentally broke it. The woman was, understandably enough, a bit broken herself and left the glass shards on the kitchen counter, unable to do the inevitable. She kept saying, "Maybe they can fix it somehow." But reality says, "You can't repair broken crystal." Dykstra thought of the paralytic lowered down from the roof. "You can't repair broken spinal cords... spinal nerve cells simply don't regenerate like other cells." Yet the man's friends refused to face reality. The broken glass remained on the counter for weeks, a constant reminder of its fragile reality. One day the woman announced she was going to call up Steuben to see if they might be able to fix the vase. Dykstra tried not to roll his eyes at her silly idea. She called and told them how much she loved that vase and that although she knew it was crazy, she wondered if they might have a suggestion. They said they were sorry for her loss, but the vase was no longer in production. But what they said next took her breath away. If she would bring the vase to their store, they would fashion a replacement at no cost. Steuben would bear the high cost of what the student had broken. Our realities are being weighed down by anchors so heavy they can't envision a new path, a fresh approach to God's activity. It is true that you can't fix broken crystal and spinal nerve cells don't regenerate, but that is only half the story. If we take the chance to step out of our comfort zone, we may see that Christianity is not as much a belief system as it is a way of life, a relationship of love with God and each other. As such, remember Christianity has evolved before; it can evolve again and we can all set sail together as one.