

Pentecost 13
The Rev. Tricia de Beer
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Helping, Fixing or Serving?

In today's gospel, Jesus is really upset with his questioner. Why is his response so heated? Looking at the issue from the perspective of the leader of the synagogue, you might see that he is not against healing, he is just concerned to keep the Sabbath holy. After 18 years why couldn't the woman have waited for one more day? Why not do it on a work day?

Jesus points out that they would water an ox on the Sabbath, but not care for this woman suffering for 18 years! But the real issue is not about what might be permissible. Jesus' basic assumption is that what God cares about the most is people's well being.

Elsewhere he states: 'The Sabbath was made for people; not people for the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27). What were at stake here were two critical things-- how the leader of the synagogue understood God, and his attitude toward the people he sought to serve.

The theology which informs Jesus' attitude is diametrically opposed to the leader's theology. Both would affirm that we must love God with the whole heart and soul and strength and that this needs to show itself in action. For the leader, this meant keeping the commandments. That made sense. Behind it is an image of God saying: I am God. I must be obeyed. I alone deserve your loyalty and service. That also makes sense. The outcome is we seek to know what God's commands entail, how they apply, and we keep them. Simple as that! Our devotion is reflected to the extent we take that challenge seriously. I

could just as easily be describing what many Christians have seen and still see as the universal duty incumbent on us all. Isn't that what Jesus himself would have said?

Yes and no. He did say he did not come to abolish the law. But there is a subtle difference. It runs deeply into our assumptions and attitudes. What is God really like?

What if God's chief concern is not to be obeyed, but something else? What if God's chief focus is love and care for people and for the creation? Then the focus moves from God's commands to God's people and world. It is as though God is telling us to get our priorities right. Commandments, rules, guidelines, traditions, laws, policies, scriptures are all subordinate to the purpose of love. God's focus is not self-aggrandizement, as it is with so many who have power and wealth and want to keep it, but generosity and giving, restoration and healing, encouraging and renewing.

The second thing which grieved Jesus was the way the leader viewed the woman. In fact, that was the problem--he did not see her. He did not see her as a precious child of God. He did not see a woman who was suffering. She was just an instance of a moral problem. Her dignity, her inestimable value, her intense suffering was not seen.

Contrast that with the way Jesus saw people. When the woman touched the hem of his garment in the middle of a raging crowd, Jesus turned and said "Who touched me?"

When a voice called from a little man in the tree on the other side of the crowd, Jesus called out "Zaccheus, come down". When the rich man came to him to ask what he must do, we are told Jesus looked at him and loved him. The reason Jesus was so vehement in today's gospel story, is that we cannot love when we fundamentally hold another person as a problem.

This is true of teachers trying to teach, or parents trying to lead, or healers trying to heal. It is true of people in business. It is true for all of us-- whoever we seek to serve. We can only serve those whom we recognize as sacred mystery.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen is a psychiatrist who was diagnosed with Crohn's, a chronic, progressive intestinal disease when she was fifteen. At twenty-nine much of her intestine was removed surgically and she was left with an ileostomy. While this surgery had given her back much of her vitality, the appliance she had to wear, and the profound change in her body made her feel hopelessly different, permanently shut out of the world of femininity and elegance. She didn't know if she could cope with it. She described what a difference it made to her when the person caring for her actually saw her as a human being. Dr. Remen describes a moment when her care taker truly effected her healing because of the way she served. She says:

In a friendly way she told me her first name and asked if I wished to have my ileostomy changed. When I nodded, she pulled back my covers, produced a new appliance, and in the most simple and natural way imaginable, removed my old one and replaced it, without putting on gloves. I remember watching her hands. She had washed them carefully before she touched me. They were soft and gentle and beautifully cared for. She was wearing a pale pink nail polish and her delicate rings were gold.

At first, I was stunned by this break in professional procedure. But as she laughed and spoke with me in the most ordinary and easy way, I suddenly felt a great wave of unsuspected strength come up from someplace deep in me, and I knew, without the slightest doubt, that I could do this. I could find a way. It was going to be all right.

I doubt that she ever knew what her willingness to touch me in such a natural way meant to me. In ten minutes she not only tended my body, but healed my wounds. What is most professional is not always what best serves and strengthens the wholeness in others. Fixing and helping create a distance between people, an experience of difference. We cannot serve at a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected, that which we are willing to touch. Fixing and helping are strategies to repair life. We serve life not because it is broken but because it is holy.” (Shambala Sun, Sept. 1999)

Serving as Jesus served, requires us to know that our humanity is more powerful than our expertise and what we think we know. I am not saying that all regulations can be abandoned, but rather that no regulation need be adhered to at the expense of the dignity of another human being. We have all been helped by a great number of people, and fixed by a great many others who did not recognize our fundamental wholeness. All that fixing and helping leaves us wounded in some important and fundamental way. Only service heals.

Service is not an experience of strength or expertise; service is grounded in an experience of mystery, surrender and awe. Helpers and fixers feel causal. Servers may experience from time to time a sense of being used by God-- as God's hands, and God's heart. Those who serve have traded a sense of mastery for an experience of mystery. In so doing, all of us are transformed.

Jesus spent much of his ministry in a struggle to communicate a different way of imagining God and a different attitude toward those we serve. God is not to be modeled

on the aloof king and powerful father, but on the mother looking for a lost coin and the dad running down the road to meet a lost son. The facades of keeping a distance are dropped in favor of affection and caring. It is a very different model of God and it produces a very different way of serving the world and one another.

I have a suggestion for how we might live into this mystery more. Before you get out of bed, try picturing those you seek to serve that day. Even if you don't know them personally or individually or very well, picture them as children of God. In your mind's eye, say to them "I love honor and respect the light of Christ within you." And when someone is behaving badly and we cannot see that light, perhaps we will need to do it even more often. Ask God to reveal the fundamental truth that the light of Christ is in that person, even if we can't see it. From that place of connection—connected to the blessed mystery in each of us, we join Jesus in truly serving and healing the world.