

Being Made Uncomfortable

Just a quick sidenote. I included the verses after the assigned reading from the Revised Common Lectionary so that we can understand the increasing tension between Jesus and the priests which will lead us to the events of the next two weeks and ultimately to Easter Sunday.

It's been said that "God comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable." The origin of that quote is actually from a Chicago newspaper journalist named **Finley Peter Dunne** in 1902 in a column he wrote for a small newspaper. The column appeared as an 'everyman's column' and **Mr. Dunne** used to phrase to observe the power of the newspaper to look out for the small guy who would get trampled by the fat cats in the city. It wasn't until 1987 when Martin Marty reworked that phrase to reflect God's effect on us. The line of thought in terms of God afflicting and comforting is along the same line of reasoning as Dunne's thought about the purpose of newspapers. Just as Dunne saw the journalist as the voice for those who otherwise not have a voice against the rich and powerful, God afflicts those who feel smug about their religion and brings comfort to those who are at the margins of society, those who are forgotten or pushed aside, those who have no voice or whose voice has been silenced.

I do not want to discount or discard this understanding of God, especially since it is in large part how Jesus acted during His ministry. But today, I would like to take a different approach to what it means to be comfortable. I would like to propose that the blind man in last week's Gospel and Lazarus were actually 'comfortable.' Not necessarily in the sense of being financially set or having an easy life-style, but they knew their place in society and knew what was expected of them.

The blind man knew where he had to sit in order to beg to help out his family. The expectations of him were rather low - be out where the people passed by and hope that they might have an extra coin or two that they could give him. He would have been a regular sight for those who went by that place - almost like a street vendor at lunchtime in one of the big cities today - you would expect to see him there. Basically, he knew his place in society and would not make any waves, he accepted his 'role' in life. Lazarus, now he's a little bit different. Yes, he died, but that is not to say that he didn't know what was expected of a dead man. Basically, it was to stay in the tomb, wait for the Day of the Lord when he would be raised from the dead and receive his eternal reward. That is what was expected of a dead man. Nothing more, nothing less. Both of these men were 'comfortable' in the role they had in society, as a blind beggar and as a dead man.

But then Jesus intruded into their lives. The blind man sees and the dead man lives. Both, I would say, would wonder, 'now what?' "What do I do now, I can't sit on the corner and beg. "Now, I am expected to work and earn my way through life," the blind man would say. I can imagine Lazarus saying, "What now do I do, I was just getting comfortable in the tomb, getting used to the dark, having my soul go where souls go and waiting for the coming of the Messiah." Jesus changed all that for both of these guys. The Gospels don't tell what happened afterwards to these two. The blind man was kicked out of the synagogue and by extension by the community. He had nowhere else to turn for community, except to Jesus. Tradition holds that Lazarus eventually became a bishop of the church on the island of Cyprus where he is buried after he died again and that there's an inscription on his tomb "Twice Died." Lazarus, already a friend of Jesus, had his relationship with Jesus strengthened. He had nowhere else to go since John writes that the Pharisees were

looking for a way to have him killed as well as Jesus. I think that it's good that we don't know 'the rest of the story' because it leaves it open and we can see ourselves in the story and have our own ending to it. So, the question becomes for us, have we become comfortable in our lives, accepting the roles that society has 'given' to us, defining us as who we are and what we can and cannot do?

The more I thought about these two stories, and how God had intruded on their lives, I realized that God is always intruding on people's lives. The Old Testament is full of people where God intruded, calling them to do something that they wouldn't have done otherwise. Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the other prophets are just a few examples from the Old Testament where God came in, took them away from their comfortable lives and sent them in a different direction. In the New Testament, there are the apostles and Paul and all those who had personal encounters with Jesus, all had their comfortable lives changed by the intrusion of God. How does God intrude into your life, changing it, sending you in a different direction that what you thought or wanted it should go?

I find it interesting that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead for 'the glory of God,' so that the people could see the 'glory of God.' When I think of the glory of God, I think of bright light, people standing around in white robes singing praises to God with outstretched arms, in a truly majestic scene. But in today's reading, the glory of God comes in the stench of death. This could lead one to conclude as Jonah did and the Psalmist who noted that there was no place where one could go and hide from God. But this Gospel reading tells us more than that, more than God being able to find us wherever we go. God does more than just 'seek' when we play 'hide & seek' with God. But then God changes the rules of the game. We no longer have to try to get to 'home free' ourselves, but God takes us there. God came to Lazarus to bring

him back to life, foreshadowing Jesus' death & resurrection a short time later. I don't think that God does this just so that He can show off His power and abilities. Rather, God does it out of love for His creation, for our benefit.

So, as we begin to head into the home stretch of our Lenten journey, we are assured today that we are not on this journey alone, that God is with us, guiding us, bringing us back from our spiritual death, making us whole again through the cross of Jesus. How is God making you uncomfortable?

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/HIqzOGn7II8>

Service: <https://youtu.be/XOPC8wQsdRI>