

March 19, 2023
“Spit and Mud”
Psalm 23 / John 9:1-17, 24-25
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Like Jennine Miller, I spent my first two years after college in the United Methodist Church's US-2 program – as the name suggests, a two-year program of service in the United States, affiliated with AmeriCorps.

Jennine spent her two years in Philly. I spent mine in Baltimore, primarily assigned to work at an emergency homeless shelter that was housed in the basement of a United Methodist congregation in North Baltimore. A fellow Reconciling Congregation as it turned out, a designation I knew nothing about at the time.

The overall experience was pivotal for me, probably shaping the direction my life would take more than any other.

Part of my responsibility was regularly staffing the shelter over night, along with a volunteer. Reflecting on this week's scripture texts, as Gerald just read for us, I was reminded of one experience in particular.

The shelter was relatively small, with room for up to 30. Mostly men. We all slept on cots spread out in the basement, maybe a couple of feet between each one.

Everyone was asleep the night I'm remembering. And it was the middle of the night when the sound of someone throwing up woke me up. **PAUSE**

That sound, we all know, is not pleasant. And we all know that the SOUND and/or SIGHT and/or SMELL of someone else throwing up can lead us down the same path.

I'm sorry to paint this picture, but this is how the story goes.

Now, as a parent, I have had this experience many times since. But to be clear, this was my first go-around on the caregiving, clean-up side of things.

And, as Amy and Gabe can attest, you should know that I have an especially sensitive gag reflex.

The sound of someone throwing up got me started. Thankfully that someone ran into the bathroom right away, and thankfully I was spared the sight of it, but it was dark – so I had to be creative and careful, with a flashlight, to figure out where his cot was among the sea of cots, and where he threw up BEFORE running into the bathroom. While also trying to prevent anyone, or everyone, else from waking up.

I managed to do that, but then of course had to reckon with the smell. Again, my sincere apologies for this story.

It was ALL I could do not to throw up. I could hear the someone continuing to do his thing in the bathroom, and I was determined to clean up the mess before he came back – and before anyone else woke up to reckon with the smell. The worst-case scenario of a chain reaction did cross my mind.

I grabbed cleaning supplies and, slowly but surely, and as quietly as I could, SOMEHOW managed to do that, too. Nobody else, at least to my memory, woke up. Or threw up.

I checked in with the someone in the bathroom. Thankfully no mess there to deal with. He was fine, feeling better, and did finally fall back asleep.

I did not. But I was OK with that, all things considered. It was, by my account, a minor miracle.

Now I don't tell you this disgusting story to celebrate what a great person, or Christian, or whatever, I am. I think you all know that already. Kidding.

I was doing my job, right? I was just doing my job.

I DO tell you this disgusting story because for me, it was an experience that profoundly moved the needle on what compassion INVITES of us. What compassion, and ultimately love, as God intends and as Jesus embodied, demands of us. Requires of us.

A willingness to step outside our comfort zones, for sure. But more. in this case, BOTH a willingness to move beyond any questions of who's deserving (OR NOT) of our compassion and love AND a willingness to get our hands dirty if necessary.

To meet and know and care FOR and connect WITH each other where we are, at our most basic human, elemental level.

That's what Calenthia, our guest preacher a few weeks ago, called the gritty gospel.

The gritty gospel is what we find in Jesus' encounter with the man born blind – on the heels, as we heard last week, of his interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well.

Spit and mud. This is Jesus moving the needle on what compassion and love look like.

His disciples come across the man first, and they immediately get lost in the questions. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

And ancient understanding – and sadly, still prevailing in some circles – of suffering as some form of divine punishment for sin, part of some divine plan. You deserve what you get. Natural disasters. Poverty. HIV/AIDS. The pandemic. The list goes on.

Nonsense, Jesus says. Nonsense. And more than that, you are missing the point. Allow me to demonstrate. Spit and mud. Spit and mud.

Approaching the blind man, Jesus spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread mud on the man's eyes. He touches him. He SEES him who cannot see, just as he saw the woman at the well who was not seen by anyone else.

Dirty hands. Gritty gospel. Elemental compassion and love ABOVE, way above and beyond, questions of worth. Insider or outsider. Sinner or saint.

Jesus answers such questions with spit and mud. This is a story of creation and recreation, poetically recalling the Genesis account of God forming human from the dust of the ground, in God's image, *Imago Dei*. And breathing into them the very breath of life.

And Jesus answers such questions with water: "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam (which means Sent)." This is a story of baptism.

This is a story, as it goes on, of anointing and calling. As one commentary puts it, Jesus is effectively “anointing the man as an apostle – not with precious oil, but with spittle, dirt and municipal water. What’s really going on here, then, is that Jesus is recruiting a new apostle from the ranks of the excluded and disinherited.”

This is a story of healing and transformation. Of connection, literally, tangibly. Jesus’ saliva-covered, mud-covered, dirty hands on the man’s eyes. On his face.

The man born blind does what Jesus says and he is able to see. It’s a miracle, no doubt, but be careful – STILL – not to get lost in the questions. Was it really? Did it actually happen?

That’s what the neighbors do. And that’s what the Pharisees do. They bring in more questions to do with sabbath-keeping, the letter of religious law. And they do what the disciples did to the blind man, now sticking the sinner label on Jesus for daring to heal on the sabbath.

“Give glory to God,” they demand of the now formerly blind man. In other words, tell the truth – God as your witness. “We know that this man (Jesus) is a sinner.”

“How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?”

“I do not know whether he is a sinner,” he says. “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” Now I see.

Compassion and love, Jesus says and does. Spit and mud. Elemental. The SPIRIT of the law ABOVE, way above and beyond, the letter.

The one who was blind now sees, and those who claim to see prove themselves blind. This is a story, like so many involving Jesus, that flips the script.

Who is blind? Who’s the sinner?

The best definition of sin I know of is that which SEPARATES us from God, from each other, from creation, from ourselves. That which turns us away from God, from each

other, from creation, from ourselves. That which pulls us away from love of God, and our neighbors as ourselves.

That which builds walls, not bridges. That which divides and distances. That which DISCONNECTS.

You disciples, neighbors, Pharisees – you are missing the point. You're asking questions that only serve to disconnect, and so you are asking the wrong questions. And so you are unable, or unwilling, to see what's right in front of you. WHO is right in front of you! And so miss the opportunity to do God's work. To be God's hands.

The point is to connect and reconnect. Elementally, sometimes literally. Remember that this is Jesus who often healed by laying on hands, by literally touching those in need of healing – or in case of the woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for years, simply being touched by her.

Remember that this is Jesus who often shared meals, broke bread, with strangers, with so-called sinners, with those considered outsiders.

The point is to connect and reconnect. With compassion and love, above all else. And with dirty hands if need be.

Healing is connection, and connection is healing. It is recreation and rebirth, new life. It is seeing – God, each other, creation, ourselves – with new eyes.

Jesus will go on to say, following this encounter: “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”

The blind shall become sighted and the sighted blind. The excluded shall be included, and the included excluded. The poor shall be rich and the rich poor. The last shall be first and the first last.

This is a profoundly countercultural paradigm shift. This is the upside-down, or rather right-side-up, kingdom of God. The elemental kingdom of heaven, marked not by questions of who's in and who's out, who's a sinner and who's not, what the law says

and what it doesn't, who's a true follower and who's not, but by radical compassion and love. By connection and reconnection.

Spit and mud. And water. And, oh by the way, green pastures and still waters.

We are reminded in hearing again the soothing words of the 23rd Psalm that God, our shepherd, is the One who connects and reconnects us – again and again, to God, to each other, to ourselves; that is, to the divine, that of God, the belovedness, within each of us. All of us.

God is the shepherd who leaves the 99, safely with each other, to reconnect the one who is lost. The ones who are blind, whether they realize it or not. Or sick. Or homeless. Or hungry in body or spirit. Or poor. Or rich. Or alone. Or lonely.

God is the One who reconnects us to the earth itself, the One who restores us and our spirits and our souls and our SIGHT, by providing green pastures and inviting us to lie down in them. And by providing still waters and leading us beside them. Deep breaths, my people, deep breaths. Remember who and whose you are. And to whom you belong.

God is the One who keeps us connected even through the darkest valleys, even in the presence of those who seek only to disconnect and distance and divide.

God is the One who follows us, pursues us, with goodness and compassion and love until our cups overflow. And the gritty gospel calls us to do the same. It' about connecting and reconnecting. Literally, if necessary, getting our hands dirty. Compassion and love at its most basic and most elemental. The stuff of spit and mud and water and earth.

And vomit.

By the way, for what it's worth, the name of that homeless shelter, housed in the basement of St. John's of Baltimore City United Methodist Church? Heart's Place.

Friends, always open to acknowledging the various ways in which we are or may be blind and in need of healing ourselves, may we continue to make places within and beyond ourselves full of heart. May we continue to follow Jesus, however blindly at times, through the wilderness and brokenness of the Lenten journey, erring on the side of radical compassion and love that leads to new life.

May it be so.