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“A Whole-Body Gospel”

Genesis 17:1-11, 15-16

Mark 8:31-38

I took a class in seminary about improvisation in worship – borrowing from improv theater to push our own thinking about what worship could look like. And one week, we took a theater game about high status and low status characters, and put it into a bible story. We had read a story from somewhere in the gospels – one of the stories about Jesus healing a leper and the way everyone else reacted – and each of us were secretly assigned a character in the story. We were supposed to interact with each other, in character, and then line ourselves up based on our social status: high status at one end down to lowest status at the other end.

I was assigned Jesus. Oh hey, that’s an easy one! Of *course* I’m the most important person in that story!

But then I started actually talking to my classmates, and trying to get into character, and I didn’t really know what to say to the important folks, the scribes and religious leaders and all, and so they sort of turned their backs and bumped me further down the line.

And then I started talking to the poor folks and the lepers, and that felt a little easier to figure out. I know how Jesus would talk to them. And I’m supposed to touch the lepers, I know that, but then my classmate acted out being healed! And suddenly the other lepers start to nudge me back up toward the higher-status end of the line, but that doesn’t feel right either!

So as the rest of the class lined themselves up neatly according to their characters’ social status, there I was at the end of the line with the three people playing lepers, jumbled up in an awkward clump as we played the game of “no, you go ahead!” “no, you first, I insist!”

Finally I gave in and took a spot ahead of them, not quite at the bottom of the line, while we all revealed our characters and started to debrief the exercise. And almost immediately I started kicking myself, because that spot didn’t feel right either, and maybe I should have insisted on putting myself further down and I was letting my ego get ahead of me.

Because Jesus certainly had some things to say about social status. The last shall be first and all that, right? But really, couldn’t I just be above the lepers at least? Do I really have to be *all* the way at the end?

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Jesus was pretty good at saying things that make us uncomfortable, starting at the very beginning with Peter, and no less so today. This reading from Mark shifts the focus of the whole gospel – we had been just walking around witnessing some healings, learning some parables that were confusing at first but

then sort of started to make sense, and then Peter finally says that he thinks Jesus is the messiah we're waiting for, and BAM! Suddenly Jesus starts talking about having to suffer and die, and if that weren't crazy enough, that we who want to follow are going to have to take up our own crosses and be prepared to suffer the same way.

It's a game-changer, that cross is, and we still don't quite know what to do with it today, whether Jesus' or our own. On one hand we raise it up so high, put it on a magical spiritual pedestal, while we sing ecstatic songs about the flowing, saving blood, that it becomes totally divorced from the gory reality of one man's public torture and execution.

Or on the other hand, we wipe all the blood and gore away, not dwelling on Jesus' pain and death because really the *resurrection* is the only thing that matters now. An empty cross is all *we* need, because of course we're not going to die or suffer or anything ... so what does all that have to do with *us*?

And if we don't really know what the cross meant for Jesus, then we certainly don't know what it means for us when Jesus challenges us to take up our own crosses. We avoid looking directly at anything that might remind us of death at all, let alone our own. And so this image of bearing our own crosses turns into a glorification of self-denial and bloody sacrifice, if we let it, or else we turn it into a meaningless metaphor and let the weight of this challenge slide off into a platitude about just not being arrogant.

Jesus was someone who turned all social hierarchy on its head. As a rural Jewish peasant, he was already not at the top of the heap; but then as he left his home and began breaking social rules, he aligned himself with lepers, with women, with Samaritans, giving up what privileges he had in order to defend those more marginalized than he was. He put his own body on the line in order to stand between the woman caught in adultery and those who would stone her to death. He made his own body ritually unclean, risking disease and shame and social sanction in order to stand with people who needed healing and needed friendship.

While most of us spend our lives climbing up the social ladder, trying to be more important and more influential and more respected, Jesus fought his way down. Even his own disciples tried to stop him – reminding him what would happen if he ate with *them* or touched *her* – and especially they pushed back when Jesus said he'd have to *die*. It's a scandal, because that's not what messiahs did! It's certainly not what they went looking for.

No wonder Peter rebukes him. Jesus, that's just not what you *do*! That's not how this game works. While everyone else is fighting their way to the top, Jesus pushes back and insists on living like some kind of crazy person who doesn't even recognize that there are rules and he's breaking them all. No wonder he winds up getting himself killed, and in the most shameful way of all.

Rome just continued the story that Jesus himself wrote with the way he lived. Okay, if you're going to insist on giving up all your status in society by eating with *those* people and standing up for *that* woman, then we'll finish the job with your public humiliation and torture, and disrespect your body once and for all by hanging it up to die by the roadside.

When Jesus challenges his followers to take up our crosses and follow, he is issuing an invitation to join him on this counter-cultural path; down the ladder of social status, away from the power and prestige that come from oppressing others, the privilege of ignoring the humanity of those at the bottom. It's a path that takes commitment, and if we're truly following Jesus' example then we are putting our very bodies at risk: it's not enough just to think about people in need or send money every now and then. We are challenged to lose our very lives for the sake of this gospel.

No wonder we skip over this part.

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Last Sunday was the Academy Awards. I didn't watch, and by all reports I didn't miss much. But the one moment that seemed to really excite people, in the midst of all the canned jokes and identical speeches, was the performance by John Legend and Common. Their song "Glory" was written for the movie *Selma*, and it captured the spirit of the marches then and the marches today, the long fight against racial injustice.

And they staged it as a tribute to the march in Selma over the Edmund Pettus Bridge, fifty years ago next week; Common crossed the bridge rapping in a sharp black suit, followed by a chorus of marchers in slow step behind him.

Like the first marchers, the chorus was mostly African-American with a number of white folks mixed in. And as the Black marchers lifted their voices to sing of the challenges they had endured and the glory they longed for, the white marchers stayed silent.

As blogger Aliza Worthington put it, "They simply marched in step, and side by side with the Black people on the stage. The only voices we heard were the voices of people of color. White people showed UP. They walked. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder. They marched. And they let the people of color do the talking. They stood silently so Black voices could be heard."

What a powerful image, and a powerful example for us of putting one's own body on the line for someone else.

That brilliant bit of staging mostly went unnoticed, and maybe that's the point too. When we reach out to support someone, we're not doing a very good job if we spend the whole time trying to draw attention to ourselves, trying to get credit for what a generous and selfless thing we're doing.

Giving up status and privilege like Jesus did and like he challenges us to do is a whole-life and whole-body endeavor. He wound up on a cross for it, and he invites us to do the same.

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From the very beginning, God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah and the whole Hebrew people was not just a one-way covenant. God made a promise to be God to them, and in return God asked for a commitment to be God's people, marked by the physical act of circumcision. It has never just been

about a mental commitment, or a spiritual commitment – God asks us for our whole hearts and our whole lives.

And we fail to live up to our end of that promise, but God has made a covenant with us that will not be broken. God will love us and will be our God no matter what we do, and yet God is also asking us – challenging us – to do better.

We are loved with an unbreakable love. And we are called to love God not just with our minds and our souls, but also with our whole hearts and our whole lives.

Hear the good news; live the good news!