

Breaking Rank

Jennifer Davis Sensenig

5 February 2017

Texts: Matthew 8:5-13; Isaiah 63:10-19; Psalm 6; Revelation 19:6-10

Ancient Paralysis Problem

Paralysis. Even before I think about a paraplegic, I think of other kinds of paralysis, like acute grief--losing someone we love and being immobilized; or a shockwave in society that leaves us cold, afraid, disempowered; or going to prison--losing basic freedom. Physical paralysis can be the result of illness, injury, or poisoning. Not only losing the ability to move, paralysis usually means losing sensation.

After Jesus' baptism and temptation in the wilderness, he returned to Galilee, but not to his hometown of Nazareth. He relocated to the fishing village of Capernaum--a border town on the sea of Galilee, which belonged to King Herod's jurisdiction adjacent to his half-brother Philip's territory. The fishing industry and all the attendant products and services were integrated into the political economy of Rome in a pyramid arrangement. The workers were on the bottom, the tax collectors were in the middle, Herod Antipas--client king--was penultimate, and Tiberias Caesar was at the top. At the bottom were builders for boats, weavers for sail-making, farmers for flax production--for nets, merchants for salt, stonemasons for anchors, and potters for clay vat transport of fish products. I understand fish sauce was a major value-added product. And of course, fishermen.

The distribution of power in this pyramid was grossly unjust and totally obvious. It's not like there was a Galilean middle class who didn't realize how oppressive Rome was because they were temporarily protected or even useful in keeping others immobile, disempowered. It was not a society in which costly consumer goods were available by credit even among the poor. Jesus, his disciples, the crowds who heard him teach on that mountain, and everyone else at the bottom of the heap, *felt* the oppression. Workers were always at risk of falling into complete ruin. They were a desperate population.

The Spirituality of the Beatitudes

The spirituality Jesus developed in Capernaum was solidarity with the poor, the exploited, the sick, the hungry, the servants those for whom neither the Temple, nor the regional government, nor the Empire worked. Jesus--Emmanuel--was *with* these vulnerable people. And he blessed them--over and over.

You are blessed. Even if you are at your worst, at your lowest moment, you will be blessed with the kingdom of heaven. It belongs to no one else.

You are blessed even if you are burdened with grief. God will bless you with comfort and be with you no matter what--just as I am with you right now.

You are blessed, even if no one has ever noticed you. I see you. I see you who are meek and you will be blessed with an inheritance of land that will be enough for you and your family. You are not invisible. You are not expendable. You are not disposable. You are God's chosen people. You are blessed.

You are blessed, especially in your cravings for justice. You will be blessed and satisfied. No more delay. The kingdom is on its way.

Jesus went on with blessing people who demonstrated resilient faith in the midst of an oppressive society--the merciful, the pure-hearted, the peacemakers, those whose suffering did not destroy them. He called these folks--salt of the earth, the light of the world. He taught them to know themselves as blessed and to believe that God could work through them in a fresh way. He refreshed their understanding of God's law. *You have heard the laws about murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, hating enemies. The law and the prophets are to be fulfilled by doing to others what you would have them do to you. The law and the prophets are to be fulfilled in loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. I'm here to fulfill the law and the prophets. Join me.* Jesus invited these people to be part of his creative reconstruction of society.

Centurion Encounter

When Jesus first comes down the mountain a leper comes to him for healing. It's a no-brainer: physical disease, social isolation, exclusion from the Temple. Jesus heals the leper as a sign of who can participate in the kingdom of God. ***I do choose. You are no reject. I choose you, just as God chose Israel. Be clean. And show yourself to the supposed leaders of Israel, the priests.***

But then, in Capernaum this Roman Centurion approaches Jesus. The presenting problem is paralysis--not the commander's own, but that of his servant, his boy. Remember Jesus' spirituality. Jesus does not identify with a Roman Centurion. He identifies with a suffering servant who is losing or has lost sensation in his feet and legs, in his hands and arms. Jesus is with the powerless, but the man who stands before him is a soldier--a man of worldly power backed by force.

We should cut the the centurion some historical slack. He may not have been a direct Roman occupier. He was more likely working for Herod doing customs work in the border city of Capernaum to make sure that the wealth of the Galilee made it's way to Rome via to Herod--who skimmed generously for himself, before passing on what he "produced" to Tiberius Caesar. Nevertheless, in this pyramid of power the centurion and Jesus occupy very different positions. In the political economy of the Roman Empire the centurion is far and away the more powerful. He's wearing a uniform. He's carrying a weapon. But here he stands in the presence of Jesus. The centurion breaks rank with his company, with his commander over him. He humbles himself and asks for help.

***Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof;
but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed.***

As is true for most of us, coming to Jesus and humbly asking for help exposes our frailties.

Breaking Rank Today

What if those with some wiggle room in an oppressive system begin to recognize the power of those below them, begin to see the assets and strengths of those on a lower rung. What if the centurions actually need something from the Galileans that they can't take by force? What if middle class folks need the healing help of poor folks? What if those we can afford to

ignore have gifts and skills which could bring healing and hope for our shared future?

All the centurion asks of Jesus is a healing word. He asks with faith--astonishing faith--like no faith Jesus had ever experienced before. Just for some perspective, in his teaching on the mountain, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had nothing complimentary to say of Gentiles. But here is a Gentile--a worldly, non-Jewish, military commander--who humbly asks for healing--not for himself, but for someone beneath him. Perhaps the kingdom of God is on the rise, even in the life of a military officer.

Now if the only point of this story is that Jesus can heal long-distance, then all this business about 'I am unworthy' and the conversation about authority and power is unnecessary. If this is just about long-distance healing, all we need to know is that a Roman centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant--**and the servant was healed in that hour**. Praise the Lord for physical healing. The kingdom is on the rise.

But here Jesus meets someone who understands the power dynamics of his world and is willing to break rank in order to get healing. The Gentile is seeking out the Jew. The military commander is seeking out the peacemaker. The master wants his servant to be healed.

In Jesus' day the pattern of master-servant domination was repeated at every scale of society. It was between women and men, in extended families, in the marketplace and between nations. It was a paralyzing dynamic that Jesus was actively shifting by blessing people at the bottom. Brothers and sisters, in this gospel passage, God is showing us once again that people with rank and status can also participate in this kingdom of justice and mercy and joy. It takes a journey with Jesus. The Lord warns in this passage too, that even devout heirs of religious tradition who exercise master-slave dominance will be bumped from the guest list of the kingdom banquet.

If Jesus is alive, and I believe he is, then this week in your life there will be an opportunity to break rank with systems of oppression and be in solidarity with someone less privileged. I say opportunity, because this kind of shift in our spirituality is also healing for us who are caught up in our own little power trips. Do you have an opportunity to advocate for someone who is at a low point like Jesus did with his beatitudes--blessing people who were

considered worthless. Last week Ervin Stutzman was here from Mennonite Church USA and shared the vision statement of our broader church:

**God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ
and by the power of the Holy Spirit
to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace,
so that God's healing and hope
flow through us to the world.**

God calls us from our status whether we are at our lowest point or from positions of authority. God calls us to a journey with Jesus that we call church. And some days I'm sure that in the name of Jesus the church can be an instrument of healing in the paralysis of our lives, and our world. This week, let's be the church, on a journey with Jesus practicing his spirituality and political vision. Let us come humble and be healed of our own paralysis--our incapacity to move, our stuck positions, our insensitivity to the conditions of our society and the people and places who are invisible to us or beneath our rank. Heal us, Immanuel. Here we are as your church.