

“Stories: Mental Illness”

Matthew 9: 27-33 (The Message Version)

Become What You Believe

²⁷⁻²⁸ As Jesus left the house, he was followed by two blind men crying out, “Mercy, Son of David! Mercy on us!” When Jesus got home, the blind men went in with him. Jesus said to them, “Do you really believe I can do this?” They said, “Why, yes, Master!”

²⁹⁻³¹ He touched their eyes and said, “Become what you believe.” It happened. They saw. Then Jesus became very stern. “Don’t let a soul know how this happened.” But they were hardly out the door before they started blabbing it to everyone they met.

³²⁻³³ Right after that, as the blind men were leaving, a man who had been struck speechless by an evil spirit was brought to Jesus. As soon as Jesus threw the evil tormenting spirit out, the man talked away just as if he’d been talking all his life. The people were up on their feet applauding: “There’s never been anything like this in Israel!

The word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God!

I came across this quote from a podcast during sermon prep this week...

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This statement is part of a larger conversation in which the author shared that her narrative as a child and as a young adult was shaped by the stories she grew up with as a white child in the white suburbs of apartheid South Africa. She said that these stories were grounded in the narrative of a community, of a country committed to not seeing, committed to denial at a fundamental level.

These stories have continued to shape her work as an adult, pushing her to ask the larger questions of who is seen and not seen, ultimately seeking to bring about healing by inviting others to discover how do we see ourselves full formed, whole human beings. In other words, how do the stories which are told to us, or told about us create a false sense of who we really are as humans. And I would add in faith terms, who we are as Beloved Children of God.

This conversation has stayed with me this week, especially as we continue through this season of recovery. The thought that we as individuals, as communities create environments of toxic positivity is a harsh truth we would rather not face. This is especially true for us as communities of faith. Somehow, we embraced this idea that everything about our lives, about our churches, about our families, about our jobs, that everything has to be sunshine and rainbows. And if it is not, then we are at fault, then we did something wrong, that we are somehow “made wrong and need to be fixed.”

I cannot tell you how many times I have found myself questioning myself, telling myself that I am not enough, that I am not good enough, that if I would only have more money, have more stuff, be more, you can fill in the blank here, then I would finally find acceptance or finally be happy. I cannot tell you how many times I have bought into this false narrative of scarcity, into a false narrative of

perfection. I cannot tell you how many times I have allowed myself to get caught up in an atmosphere of toxic positivity which skews my perception of reality, or how many times I have chosen comfort rather than naming the hurt in my midst.

These false narratives of perfection which we tell ourselves, these atmospheres of toxic positivity stand in stark contrast to everything we know about the healing narratives found in the Gospels. Every single one of the stories about Jesus, about his ministry, about his teachings, every single story related to Jesus tells us that upholding these false narratives of perfection or clinging to these atmospheres of toxic positivity is not what we are called to do. We are not called to choose our comfort over other people's reality. Instead, every single story about Jesus, about his teachings, about his ministry shatters these misconceptions by confirming that God has named all as Beloved Children of God, that in the beginning, God created us and said that it was good. Everything about our faith narrative, about the story of God's love which started back in Genesis, which goes through Revelation, which continues still today shatters these misconceptions and tells us that at a fundamental level, we are created in the image of God and filled with divine worth.

The healing narratives found in the Gospels invite us to become what God already knows to be true, that we are part of the vision of God's grace come to life,

invited to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world, not only for others but for ourselves as well, just like we discover in our text for today.

In this text from the Gospel of Matthew, we hear another healing narrative from the Gospel of Matthew. Again as in weeks past, at first glance, there does not seem to be anything to set this story apart. It is very similar to the other healing narratives which we have heard over the past few weeks or so we would assume.

In this text, Matthew invites us to move beyond our first glance at this text by playing on the word follow. We are told that these two men followed Jesus. Upon hearing this phrase, we remember that earlier in the Gospel, Jesus comes upon Simon and Andrew and invites them to come and follow him, that he will make them fishers of people. Then a few verses later, Jesus comes upon James and John and again invites them to come and follow him.

For Matthew, the word follow means discipleship. These two men are following Jesus, not because they need to be fixed. They are following Jesus as disciples. They are already living out their call to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. They are already embracing the good news by being the heart and hands of God in this world. These two men are already living out this vision of God's grace come to life here on Earth.

For Matthew, the healing in this text is secondary. What is important is that these men know that they are disciples, that they have accepted the invitation to follow Jesus, that they already see themselves, believe themselves to be Beloved Children of God.

Matthew wants his readers to understand that these two men do not believe because they are healed. They are healed because they believe. The healing becomes the avenue for the men to become what they already hold to be Truth... that they are filled with divine worth and embraced as children of God.

Again, Matthew points out that Jesus does not play by our rules, that Jesus doesn't ask our permission before doing ministry, that Jesus does not choose to uphold a false narrative of perfection nor does Jesus create an environment of toxic positivity by choosing his comfort over other people's reality. Rather time and time again, in his teachings, in his preaching, in his interaction with people, Jesus transcends the barriers which society puts up. Jesus breaks down the barriers used to keep people out. Time and time again, Jesus meets the people where they are and talks with them. He engages them as humans filled with divine worth, as people created in the image of God. Time and time again, Jesus creates an environment where all can become what God already knows to be true...that all

are Beloved Children of God. And as Jesus' disciples, as ones who have embraced the call to follow him, we are called to do the same.

Or as one person shared, "The healing narratives in Matthew represents a bigger truth. The truth that God, in Jesus, has come to heal us all, to bring us all out of the shadows and into the light. This is a story about individual healing and eschatological deliverance. Our stories, our lives, are tangled in the web of God's love. Our truth and our stories liberate us and connect us to one another.

Reclaiming our "sense" of who we are, meaning (being able to see and hear anew), being grounded in a narrative which brings forth new life, which brings forth hope, being grounded in a narrative that does not seek perfection but seeks healing and wholeness, reclaiming this story, God's story as our True story is part of healing our minds and spirits."

The beauty of this text is that these two men were empowered to become what they already believed, what they already knew to be true...that they Beloved Children of God, filled with divine worth.

Imagine being invited to let go of all the labels and stereotypes which this world places upon us. Imagine being invited to see ourselves as how God sees us. Imagine being invited to let go of the false narrative of perfection, to dismantled

the atmospheres of toxic positivity. Imagine being invited to live as fully formed, whole, beloved Child of God.

Because that is what it means to truly live out our call as disciples of Christ, cultivating, creating such a world so that all may experience the wonderful, healing good news that they are filled with divine worth. May it be so. Amen.