

CROSSWALK: Walking on the Wild Side
Luke 14:1-6
March 7, 2010

That Jesus...

I wonder, if airplanes had been flying over the Judean desert in his day, would he have been the first to strap a parachute on his back and dive through the sky to the ground?

I wonder, if rubber bands as long as football fields called bungees had been invented, would he have tied one around his waist and jumped off a bridge over the river Jordan?

I wouldn't be surprised to learn that Jesus had long red hair and could snowboard the half pipe with amazing double McTwists,.

Because you see, Jesus was a risk-taker.

Jesus walked on the wild side.

Take this morning's text for example.

Jesus had been invited to dine with the hoity toity of Jewish society. This was one those "Black tie" events at the local politicians home to which only the crème de la crème of society would have been invited.

Does it surprise you that Jesus was the recipient of such an invitation? After all, don't we see Jesus as just one of the "folk," a home-spun kind of guy who chose to spend his time with the common man and woman? Don't we think of him as one who usually shunned this kind of shindig?

But here he was, dressed to the nines, approaching the gates of the local leader of the Pharisees on the Sabbath.

Does it surprise you that the Pharisees would have invited Jesus to one of their exclusive Sabbath soirees? Or does it surprise you more that Jesus would have accepted the invitation?

For those of us who have kept up with Jesus' cross-walk, we remember that there was no love lost between these two. Jesus was shaking the temple pillars with his teachings, challenging the authority of the Pharisees. As he made his cross-country tour around the lands of Judea and Galilee, he admonished the Pharisees for their misunderstanding and mis-use of God's holy word, especially with how they treated all of God's children.

The Pharisees, for their part, were not happy with the way Jesus was playing fast and loose with what they saw was the inerrant, literal word of God. They truly believed that they were what their name implied, "The separate ones" of the chosen people. The Hebrew root word of the name Pharisee means "To separate," and they believed that they had been set apart as the most righteous, the most right of all the chosen people of Israel.

They also saw that Jesus could have been one of them. He had the right pedigree. He had the knowledge base. Maybe they invited him to dinner that night to convert him to their side.

Or maybe, as the old saying goes, "they kept their friends close, but their enemies closer."

After all, the text tells us that they were "watching" him. Just that phrase in verse one let's us know that there was some suspicion on their part, some judgment they were waiting to make.

For those of us who have spent time walking in the Gospel word, we know that whenever we hear the words "Sabbath", "Jesus" and "Pharisees" in one story—something's bound to happen.

And sure enough, it did. As Jesus walked up to the front door, wearing his Sunday best, the scripture tells us that a man with dropsy walked by.

The Greek term translated "dropsy" is formed on the word for water and means something like "waterlogged." From a biomedical point of view, "dropsy," an almost obsolete term for generalized edema, refers to bodily swelling due to an excess of fluid; not a disease itself, dropsy is an indication of malfunction in the

body, especially congestive heart failure or kidney disease.” An accompanying symptom was insatiable thirst, wanting water in a body which is already retaining too much fluid. (Brian Stoffregen’s exegesis, from two sources: Tannenhill’s commentary on Luke; (pg. 228) and Green’s commentary on The Gospel of Luke (pp. 546-7).

This man with dropsy waddles across Jesus’ path just as he was about to have the Sabbath meal with those who were the strictest observers of the law.

Now let me make it clear—the man with dropsy was not another guest showing up for the party that night. Far from it. The Pharisees believed that any kind of physical infirmity was a sign of God’s displeasure. In their world view, illness or disability was a physical manifestation of sin, and was God’s punishment against that person or the family line from which he or she was descended.

Pharisees, who considered themselves the purist of pure, would have “separated” themselves from the dropsy dude, not wanting to sully themselves by his unclean and impure presence.

More likely than not, the man with dropsy was one of many such inhabitants of every city and village of that time that had little access to what health care there was—there was no life-saving lasics for this guys, no diuretic which would have helped relieve some of his swollen misery. All he could do was painfully walk the streets, begging for the random charity of others, waiting to die an early death.

And then, he happened to cross Jesus’ path right before the watching eyes of the Pharisees.

Can’t you just imagine the mischievous glint that came into Jesus’ eyes? Knowing they were watching, and what they were watching for, he decided to give them what they expected. That’s when Jesus decided to take a walk on the wild side.

Did you hear what the scripture tells us happened? Jesus looked at the lawyers and Pharisees and asked, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?”

There was no response from his host and the other guests, probably because they knew the question was rhetorical. Of course it was against the law to heal on the Sabbath. It had been that way for centuries, from the time Moses handed down the Ten Commandments. Wasn't Commandment #4 clear enough? "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, you manservant or your maid servant or you cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates."

Healing was considered work, and no self-respecting Pharisee or strict observer of the law would work on the Sabbath.

Jesus, our scripture tells us, decided he was no self-respecting Pharisee, but a God-respecting savior, and he reached out and healed the man, then let him go—completely well.

When he turned to those gaped-mouth observers, he asked, "Which of you, having a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will not immediately pull him out, even though it is the Sabbath?" And they could not reply to this.

Then he turned and walked into the house, the host and the guests following him in, where dinner was waiting. The rest of the chapter tells about their dinner conversation, which I urge you to read at your leisure.

As we consider this text from the distance of two millennia and a culture half a world, we can see where the path of Jesus' crosswalk intersects with each of our lives today.

At one time or another, each one of us has been like the man with dropsy. Some of us here this morning literally struggle with edema, living our lives walking a tight rope between taking diuretics and rationing our fluid intake. How we long for Jesus' healing touch!

More of us have been broken in body at some time or another, and even more have experienced a break in our spirit. Those of us who have been there—who live with bodies that have aged to weakness, or whose bodies have been broken

by disease in some way, or whose spirits have been shattered by some life pain—we know that such situations many times separate us from our community.

- The homebound who used to be active but are now confined to the familiar walls of their dwelling, feel isolated because few people come to visit;
- the hospitalized who lie in unfamiliar beds experiencing a break in sleep every 4 hours with people who look down from standing positions at our vulnerable state;
- the mentally broken who hide behind glazed eyes, or in the darkness of unlit rooms which symbolize the darkness of their state of mind, whose presence makes people feel uncomfortable so that others avoid.

People who have been broken like this know what it feels to be disconnected from the active world we once knew and lived. And yet, we yearn for connection especially at those times.

We all long to be cared for with dignity and compassion, not doubly injured by a system that doesn't feel we're worth care because we are broken and do not have the place in society to pay for it, to earn it. We yearn for the wholeness of being noticed, not shunned because we are not whole-bodied. We want to feel the touch of God, but instead, we are given the back hand of invisibility.

If there are some in this room who have not been the man with dropsy yet—don't worry, you will. It is inevitable. And we all pray that we will come across the path of Christ when we're in the midst of it, that someone from the body of Christ will notice us and comfort us and work with us for wholeness.

We also have been, more than we'd like to admit, one of the Pharisees watching that day. We confess that there have been times that we have shunned those whom we haven't felt eligible to be a part of our crowd. We interpret scripture to support our perspective—to put us in the righteous place to keep us "separated" from those who are different from us. It's not a new story—each generation has their "scape-goat"—their untouchables.

We shutter our eyes from seeing the pain that our ignore-ance lashes upon the hearts of others.

Yes, we've all been one of the Pharisees who watch and judge others from a place where we feel we sit in the cat-bird seat.

And then, we meet Jesus, who unsettles us with the way he shows no fear as he takes risk after risk, as he challenges our status quo, as he walks confidently on the wild side.

Thanks be to God, yes, we also have been like Christ at times. How we yearn we could be more like Christ all the times, but we have experienced those moments when we saw someone in pain, and we reached out with God's loving embrace. There have been those moments when we knew to speak out for justice in some of our circles would have rattled the rules of "civilized" society, and we spoke anyway. There have been those times we have taken a few steps on the wild side, joining Jesus in putting people before the letter of the law, putting God before our own self-righteousness.

Christ's call to us to join him on his cross walk means we are invited to walk on the wild-side with him, to take risks, and even face danger.

You know, I don't think if Jesus were walking our earth today that he would necessarily skydive or bungee jump or snow-board for extreme competitions. That's not the wild-walk of Christ.

But I do think he would have sat in the front of the bus with Rosa Parks on that day half a century ago. I do think he would have rushed to Haiti, or to Chile, with his healing hands a-ready even though the aftershocks still shook the earth. I do think he would have held out his arms and used his body to cover the tortured and bound body of Matthew Shepherd. I do think he would raise his voice to speak up for the voiceless in every walk of life, even if it makes him an unacceptable dinner companion. I do think he would risk even his own life for the sake of another child of God's.

Next time you sing the old hymn "O master let me walk with thee," think about what you're saying. Are you ready to walk on His wild side?