

Introduction

Please sing this prayer with me -

O God who made the heart and ear,
we listen care'fly as you draw near,
to hear your word in many ways,
and live your life through all of our days. Amen.

One of Mark's favorite words, *euthus* in the Greek language, means IMMEDIATELY.

It's a term that's used almost 90 times in the NT, about half of which come from the gospel of Mark.

Do you remember the first sermon in our series "Meeting Jesus on the Road?"

It was there that we learned that God is a "three miles per hour God," a walking God, because the average person walks at three miles per hour, and God walks with us.

In Mark's gospel, though, God is a running God. Up until today's text, it's as if Jesus is in a hurry to go from place to place to preach, teach, and heal.

It's as if the needs are so great, God has to meet them immediately.

Today, though, in our texts, the gospel of Mark undergoes a "holy slowing," as my Franciscan kin call it, as we get to this part of the story of Jesus.

Looking at our two texts this morning, from Mark 11 and 15, there are 211 verses between them.

Mark seems to be saying, "Slow down, listen carefully, and hear the heart of the Christian message in this part of the Jesus story."

So let's do just that.

Let's put our ears close to the ground.

(Read Mark 11: 1-10 and Mark 15: 37-39)

This is a word from God for the people of God. (Thanks be to God)

Humility

First, I want us to listen carefully to the donkey in our text.

When I taught reading all those years in my elementary school classroom, I tried to help my students comprehend stories from different points of view.

So within the story of our text from Mark 11, let's try to see the world through the eyes and feel the world through the heart of the donkey.

Let's think about humility.

It was pride that changed angels into demons; it is humility that changes people into angels. (St. Augustine)

Don't we need more of that kind of humility in our world today.

Donkeys are widely regarded as humble, gentle, and patient animals, often symbolizing these traits due to their steady, unassuming nature and history as loyal, hardworking beasts of burden. They are known for working without needing recognition and are associated with a "lowly disposition" rather than seeking attention.

They have served humans for a long time as dependable, strong, and patient partners.

In many cultures, particularly in the Bible, the donkey represents peace and humility (e.g., Jesus riding a donkey rather than a warhorse).

Their "stubbornness" is often actually a cautious, intelligent, and thoughtful nature, ensuring safety before moving forward.

They're able to remember faces, and know people who have their best interest at heart.

If you don't have their best interests at heart, they are hesitant to go with you.

We can learn a lot from donkeys.

They're known for being stoic, quiet, and capable of enduring challenging conditions.

They're not just seen as hardworking, but also as affectionate and loyal companions that possess a quiet, unassuming dignity.

Pastor Jennifer gave me a beautiful book of blessing by Jan Richardson titled How the Stars Get in Your Bones.

I borrowed the structure of one of her blessings to write this poem about the little donkey in the gospel of Mark.

Think of today
as a donkey,
heart wide open
in friendship,
feet weathered and worn
yet willing to walk with you anywhere you need to go,
its life a graced spaciousness
open and offering itself
to you.

Let it be a blessing
with its floppy, listening ears,
let it be a sacrament
with its big, brown, seeing eyes,
let the blanket on its back
be a refuge
and its patience and humility
be holy.

As it walks you,

rest.

As it walks you,
believe.

As it walks you,
hope.

As it walks you,
love.

Hear its silent words,
"Let the weary come,
let the broken hearted come,
let the lost come,
let the homeless come."

Hear,
"Let them find rest,
let them find comfort,
let them be found,
let them find a home."

And may it be
during this day on the donkey
you find beauty.
And may it be
as you ride along on the donkey
you find joy.
And may it be
your life fills with ordinary grace
and the sun shines on you
and you hear the words,
"Welcome home."

May we go out in humility, with "graced spaciousness" and "ordinary grace," like the little donkey who brought Jesus, who was humble and filled with grace, into the city.

Quiet, trembling mercy

Second, I want us to listen carefully to the centurion in our text.

Within the literature and legends on the early church, we learn that the centurion's name was Longinus.

He was there at the foot of Jesus' cross because he was nearly blind.

He was the one who raised his spear to Jesus' side.

The legend says that when the blood and water flowed from Jesus's side, some of it fell upon Longinus' eyes and healed him.

He was blind but now he can see.

If this wasn't actually true, it was metaphorically so.

For in this Roman soldier, we have one of the first confessions of the Christian faith.

"Truly," said Longinus, "this person was God's son."

Here was this soldier assisting in the very act of crucifying God, yet after Jesus died, when he poured forth blood and water from his side as a fount of mercy for all humankind, he drew this soldier to himself and welcomed him into the life of grace.

Longinus opened his heart to Jesus' mercy and forgiveness.

I think his heart was not conquered by power, but by nearness. By standing close enough to wounded love that it entered him.

And so it is, dear friends: we are not changed by force, but by a quiet, trembling mercy that waits until we are still enough to feel it.

Just this week, at the Pentagon, the Secretary of Defense, prayed this prayer.

"Let every round find its mark against the enemies of righteousness and our great nation," Hegseth prayed during the livestreamed service. "Give them wisdom in every

decision, endurance for the trial ahead, unbreakable unity, and overwhelming violence of action against those who deserve no mercy.”

Those who deserve no mercy.

It occurs to me that Longinus, as a soldier of the Roman Empire, as a soldier of Caesar, had been taught to think this way.

That anyone who confronted the empire or Caesar deserved no mercy.

But now he had been changed by the quiet, trembling mercy of Jesus.

And the literature and legends tell us that he went out and showed that quiet, trembling mercy to the world.

We live in a time of chaos and cruelty.

Beloved community, the word mercy is in our name.

May we go out with the quiet, trembling mercy of Jesus, with the quiet trembling mercy of Longinus, and show it to our city, and show it to the world.

Upside-down grace

Third, I want us to listen to what I call upside down grace, the kind of grace that catches you by surprise and turns your world upside down.

Recently, I had the honor of speaking to a group at Furman University.

One of the professors I met taught me about the philosopher Walter Benjamin and his idea of “weak messianic power.”

Benjamin lived and worked during the rise of fascism and nazism in Europe.

One of the last things he wrote was a Theses on the Philosophy of History.

He’d bought a painting by Paul Klee in 1920 titled “Angelus Novus,” new angel.

The Angel has a humble, compassionate face.

Her eyes don't stare ahead, as if she is marching forward, conquering history.

It's as if she's contemplating someone or something at the margins.

And indeed she is.

Her back is turned toward the future, her face toward the past.

Her hands are held out as if to tend and mend those who have been crushed or forgotten by progress.

Her wings are open.

There is a gust of wind from paradise (progress) that propels her into the future against her will, for she longs to tend and mend the last and the least who continually pile up before her.

Benjamin said that each generation has a chance to show this weak messianic power, this tending and mending those who've been hurt and forgotten by the winners of history.

And it occurs to me that we, you and me here at Triune Mercy, are like her.

We are the angels of history.

Weak messianic power is in our hands and feet and hearts.

We have the ability to share upside down grace, the kind of grace that surprises, the kind of grace that turns the world upside down.

Robin and I had the pleasure and the honor of attending a concert by the Greenville Gay Men's Chorus and the Gay Men's Chorus of Washington D.C. at First Baptist Church Greenville on Thursday night.

The music and the stories touched our hearts and reminded us of the importance of being your authentic self, of being who God made you to be.

As we listened, I remembered a moment a few years ago when the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus came to perform at FBCG.

It was a meaningful moment for me, a moment I'd hoped and prayed for when I asked FBCG in a deacon's meeting to begin the process of reaching out to the LGBTQ community in Greenville.

After that concert, a person said, "I was a bit frightened when I learned we were going to be singing in a church in the Deep South, and a Baptist church at that.

It had been so long since I had been through the doors of a church.

The strongest memory I had of church was the sound of the words, "You are not welcome here unless you change into who we want you to be!" ringing in my ears."

It was at this moment that tears began to run down his cheeks and fall to the vestibule floor.

But unlike the tears of fear and sadness that must have come from his early memories of church, these were tears of faith and gladness.

"Tonight, though, I've made a new memory. I've walked through the doors of a church, a Baptist Church in the South, no less, and heard the words, "You are welcome here just as you are, just as God made you," and I am so very thankful."

Upside down grace had surprised him, and had turned his world upside down.

Civil right marchers were battered and bruised, tattered and torn, by fire hoses, billy clubs, and police dogs.

Their spirits had cracked and their hearts were crushed.

Through songs and speeches, Fanny Lou was upside-down grace to them.

Some of you participated in the No Kings Rally in Greenville yesterday.

I couldn't help but think of the students I taught at Berea Elementary School who came to Greenville from the fields and farms, cities and barrios of Mexico, Central America and South America looking for una vida mejor, a better life, with their families but who have seen and heard the chaos and cruelty of our our present Executive Office, who have felt that chaos and cruelty in their hearts.

By being at the protest yesterday, your life spoke to them, let them know that you are here to show goodness and loving kindness to them, to be upside down grace to them that can and will change their lives.

Thank you.

And I remember a friend who stood with me on Wednesday in the mercy center and said, "Brian the fireman is helping me find a place to detox. I'm ready to turn away from alcohol, this thing that is ruining my life. I thank God, and you all at Triune Mercy Center, for helping me."

He had come face to face and heart to heart with upside down grace.

May we go out with weak messianic power, with the upside down grace of Jesus, and show it to our city, and show it to the world.

Benediction

Jesus is on the cross.

Like the little donkey, go now in humility.

Like Longinus, go now with quiet, trembling mercy.

Like Benjamin, go now with weak messianic power as angels of history.

Go now with upside down grace.

Amen.

