

The Gospel of Luke 13.10-17: Jesus & Human Dignity | Luke Knight

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Our oldest child just started pre-school, and on our walk to pre-school I've learned to leave some margin because although it takes me just five minutes to get there, it takes her longer. As well it should, when you consider just how many wonderful sticks, pinecones and squirrels there are to admire along the way. So you've got to learn to savour the walk to pre-school, because very often the best journeys take time and attention. Time and attention cost us *nothing* and yet cost us *everything* at the same time. That's a life of faith, giving our time and attention to God and to others.

A little like that patient meander to pre-school, we've been slowly making our way through the Gospel of Luke these past couple of years. There's four biographies of Jesus dating back to the first century (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), and they're called *gospels* which means "good news." So the first thing to keep in mind when looking at the biographies of Jesus is that for two thousand years people have discovered *good news* while reading them. Bad news is everywhere, but the gospels tell us that what's bursting through Jesus' life is *good news*, a profound sense of *healing and hope* for all creation. But you have to pay attention and take some time to really hear it.

The episode we just read is one of those surprising, good news accounts of Jesus' life. At this point Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to do something he clearly feels is very important (from historical advantage we know as his death and resurrection). On the road he interacts with all kinds of people, interactions which reveal things about him, and reveal things about those he comes across. Jesus doesn't so much meander towards Jerusalem – he's got a very clear purpose – but that doesn't stop him from taking time and giving attention. Jesus is a character always full of purpose *and* patience; to him they aren't mutually exclusive postures.

Flashes of compassion

As was his custom, Jesus turns up in a Jewish synagogue (a place of worship) as he's gained a reputation as a formidable teacher. He notices a woman seriously physically incapacitated, a diagnosis which is probably complex. Hard to read too much into why or how she's oppressed as she is, but the point's clear that this poor creature is in a very bad way and has been for a very long time. Jesus notices her, and doesn't just notice her, but attends to her and heals her, which is another reputation he's gained – most anywhere Jesus goes unwell people are made well, captive people are freed. One writer describes moments like these in the Gospels as "flashes of compassion" from Jesus. At times it's *almost appears* involuntary, at the very least compulsive – healing and life just spills out of him. But it's not just an outpouring of compassion, just a *feeling for* the helpless, Jesus has *the means* to do something about what he's *moved* by. In the gospels it comes across as *authority*. So the woman is healed and she praises God. You can imagine the relief and joy after years of suffering.

Who is Jesus?

I've heard my fair share of good communicators, but I've never heard a Ted Talk speaker pause mid-axiom to heal someone of cancer or dementia. But the Gospels tell us Jesus did this kind of thing constantly, and with such self-assurance, so much so they couldn't possibly get every incident down on paper. So a story like this asks us if Jesus impressed people because of how wise a teacher he was, or because of his strange confidence in facing up to *any* sickness or evil and besting it. The answer is both. The Gospels show Jesus as having an *authority like no one else around him* in how he *speaks* and what he *does*. It looks as though Jesus has *total right* in the world in which he inhabits, which makes him a strange but deeply compelling figure in history.

The other day I was turning left on Glover Road across traffic. Mid-turn, a police motorcycle came hurtling toward me. The officer shouted for me to reverse out of the intersection (something I know is a road violation, because reversing in an intersection is how I failed my first road test). While I reversed, along came a police convoy of bikes, trucks, rushing past, and just like that they were gone. I was a little shocked, and also

a little miffed. I didn't like being yelled at, they were certainly going over the speed limit, and what was so important they had to barge through, inconveniencing us all? *Who did they think they were?* And then it dawned on me. They think they're police – and in that situation can do what they like. They had an authority I don't have, so in my little Mazda I obliged. So who does Jesus think he is? That's the question at the dead centre of all four gospels. Once we've asked that question, not minimizing Jesus as just a great example or teacher, you begin to see him more clearly. And once we wrestle with the question of who *Jesus thinks he is*, we can ask *who we think he is*.

Who are we?

Back to the episode. There's other stories in the gospels similar to these where people turn on Jesus and say "Look, you can't go around doing whatever you like – who do you think you are?" Here the synagogue manager doesn't have the stomach to scold Jesus directly, so he goes the passive aggressive route, and scolds the people gathered, but it's indirectly directed at Jesus. One scholar points out that you can imagine there was some awkward and ego bruising moments for leaders in these village synagogues when Jesus turns up with such authority and wisdomⁱⁱ. But there's another point being made, because in this story the leader of the synagogue gets irritated that people are turning up in the hopes of being healed on the holy, Sabbath day when no one should be "working", including healing work. And this is where things get interesting. So steeped in how things *should* be done, in the rules that keep life moving in an orderly manner, he's missed the whole point of the Sabbath in blinding fashion. Not only is he callous and can't celebrate the obvious blessing among them in this woman's healing, he's blind to what the healing *means and the one bringing it*. In Genesis the Sabbath day is the day God "rested" or "resided" in his creation. One writer notes that this may have been the most godly Sabbath day in particular synagogue's history, where God was residing and blessingⁱⁱⁱ. So this story, like others, is a signal that good news in the flesh was being let through the door of Jesus' life into the ordinary world around him. And Israel's leadership at the time was missing it, evidenced by this synagogue leader. God's turning up, and they're tuning out.

Of course the reaction from the synagogue leader is almost absurd or comical from a distance, like something out of a Monty Python sketch, "You can't just go around healing people, we've got rules you know". Can't they see who Jesus is? Aren't they moved by his compassion, in awe the healing? But Jesus doesn't get into that, as he's focused on this woman and the lack of compassion shown and as well as the double standards "If an animal can be given water on the sabbath, do you expect me to withhold compassion from this poor human creature?" And at this point we're with him! You tell them, Jesus – put these stuffy religious types in their place, trapped in their silly little rules they can't make a little room. How myopic are they? Don't they have a heart? We sit atop our high horse, imagining that we don't have rules, regulations, traditions, obligations to meet. We presume we don't have double standards. But follow Jesus long enough and he'll interrupt our status quo and re-evaluate our priorities too. Missing the point of God's presence in a moment is easier than you think. After all, we've got places to be, stuff to get done. How attuned are we to the arrival of Jesus' kingdom in our little kingdoms?

Well the government of Pakistan should really have been more prepared. Surely we can help everyone all the time. People in addiction have made their choices; maybe if they took a little more responsibility they wouldn't need a hand out, and we wouldn't have an overdose crisis to begin with. My grandparents came here for a better life, but we can't let everyone in, can we? How much longer do we have to hear about the dark side of colonialism? I didn't work in a residential school. Oppression's just a part of history, can't we just move on?

Heartlessness can take subtle forms. But Jesus sees people, he attends to people. Sometimes we can be a little embarrassed at how callous we are when we see mercy on display, we recognize our double standards. Just because we're Christian doesn't mean we can't be cold hearted. As the psychologist Diane Langberg writes in her book, "Redeeming Power": *"Any time we confront vulnerability in newborn, a confused teen, a person hungry for love and attention...or a sick or weak or impaired person, **what comes out of us tell us about us**. Are we compassionate? Protective? Or are we exploitive, feeding off the vulnerable to meet our own needs?"*^{iv}

So this story also serves to tell us we need healing too. If we're without compassion, we too are bent double, incapacitated by the evil of self-centeredness. Jesus comes to free us also with powerful words. Strong words, but healing and truthful words none the less. So this is one of those stories in the gospels which reminds us that, well intentioned or not, humans are capable of missing the point, but Jesus never does. In the words

of John's gospel, Jesus is full of grace and truth. So we should expect plenty of moments with Jesus to be told the truth, and be shown in grace. There will be days with Jesus that we discover we've been delusional and unmerciful. Thankfully, Jesus loves us enough to take us as we are, but too much to leave us as we are. He even loves us enough sometimes to call us hypocrites, to hold up a mirror to us, not a selfie-filter, so we can see what we really look like. That's a grace, even if it's a hard grace. It's truth in love, which we needn't hide from. It's good to admit we're backward and need Jesus to turn us the right way round. Our part is confession, his part is re-orientation.

Now we should say that in this story not everyone missed the point. Luke tells us that people around were delighted with "the wonderful things he was doing". So it's possible that our hearts might be hard to Jesus and others, and it's possible that we'll welcome God's onrushing kingdom with joy! So what do we do with that? What does this episode tell us?

First, it's a good reminder that **Jesus takes his creation seriously, human dignity seriously**, even if we don't. And not only does he care, he has the power to change things, to heal, to restore, to bring hope to the totally hopeless. **Jesus is full of good news which is still breaking into the world today** (even on this sabbath day). So if our view of faith or God is missing that main point of good news – that Jesus brings hope, healing – even now, even through us – we need take another look at Jesus. The kingdom of God, says Jesus, is among you.

Another thing we can take from this is that God loves his creation, his world, more than we do. There's a peace that comes with admitting that. Someone once said: I have two pieces of good news for you, there is a Messiah and you're not him. So it's helpful to confess that we can be callous and hypocritical. Again, **our part is confession, his part is re-orientation**. We need Jesus to keep us the right way round. Rules and regulations won't do it. The sheer force of human will through social action won't do it. We need the authority of Jesus and his good news for all people, everywhere – we need to be refreshed and reoriented by Jesus ourselves. And then **we can grow up into Jesus' likeness**, with expanding hearts that put flesh on the bones of godly compassion.

It's understandable to want to try to isolate ourselves from the suffering and pain the world writhes in. It's tempting to avoid the stories of residential schools, to wash our hands of Pakistan. But Jesus sees people and doesn't distance himself from human suffering. In fact he carved a path through *his own suffering* to life for us all. So we can't fall prey to the evil of keeping the suffering of others at arm's length, because it's a bit untidy for us, or doesn't touch our immediate sphere. Like Jesus, we must take one another seriously, and let the kingdom of God break through our lives when possible, **offering healing and hope**. It might seem inconsequential in the moment, like the healing of one woman, in one small village in the first century. But that's Jesus' point in the passage we'll read next week. The kingdom of God starts out like a tiny seed, like a bit of yeast in the dough, but remember, *it grows*. So we can listen where we can, we help where we can, and trust it will all pour out to something. Like Jesus, we can move through the world *as good news people*. Which means we're willing pause our agenda and see the person across the room desperate for a flash of compassion. It takes time and attention, like the walk to pre-school. It's not a meandering without purpose, not full of unnecessary interruption. A life of faith is one of purpose *and* patience, *resulting* in mercy.

Lord, in your great mercy, we do our part and confess we need you to turn us the right way round; tune us to the frequencies of your kingdom; re-orient us around yourself, so that we can be *good news people* this very week. Lord, as the mug says, let us serve humbly in love.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What stood out to you about this story?
- What are the different responses (even characters) we can find ourselves in in this story, and what posture do each take?
- What encouraged you about this story? What challenged you?
- What does being a "good news person" look like in your life this fall?

ⁱ Rowan Williams, "Meeting God in Mark"

ⁱⁱ Tom Wright, "Luke for Everyone"

ⁱⁱⁱ Tom Wright, "Luke for Everyone"

^{iv} Diane Langberg, "Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church"