

Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley – Living River – May 16, 2019

(Some extemporaneous elaborations and humor are not on the page. ☺)

Prayer of Illumination

Mark 2:23-28

One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

This is the Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Our subject is a command: “Don’t Miss It!”

Plantar fasciitis is swelling of the plantar fascia, the muscle that runs along the bottom of your foot.

I’ve struggled with it for almost a year now.

I was exercising on a fairly regular basis walking and running on a treadmill.

Then I started to experience pain in my right ankle. Later it was the left ankle.

Still, I didn’t want to give up walking and running.

You see, when I’ve exercised well, it’s been with running.

I ran as a basketball player in junior high and high school. I ran in the Navy.

And when I’ve gotten back in decent shape, I’ve run.

Running is good for the body. Running is good for the mind.

I enjoy running! But my feet will not cooperate.

My wife suggested riding a bike. But I don’t like riding a bike. I like to run!

I thought about swimming, but I’m not a strong swimmer.

Plus, I would have to wash my hair all the time and that would mess up my perm.

So I was kinda stuck. And I was kinda stubborn.

I wanted to keep doing the thing I had always done.

I didn’t want to change. I didn’t want to learn how to do something new.

I had been running, off and on, for more than 35 years.

But in my stubbornness, I regained weight I had lost.

In my stubbornness, my A1C number inched up each time I went to the doctor.

Then, finally, the light bulb came on — what about a rowing machine?!

The rowing machine is a better workout than a bike.

It may be as good or better than running because you’re also working the upper body.

So about two weeks ago, I finally got on the rowing machine. And I like it!

So watch out this summer — I will be rowing back to better health!

But why did it take me so long to figure that out? I’m a learned man. I’m fairly intelligent.

I must confess I was stuck on what I had always done. I didn’t want to give up what I preferred.

I was becoming an old dog and I didn’t want to learn new tricks.

I almost missed it.

As I thought about being stubborn and stuck, I heard Wynton Marsalis on NPR talking about the new movie, “Bolden.”

The film is about Buddy Bolden, one of the first creators of jazz, but most of us hardly know anything about him.

When the interviewer on NPR asked Marsalis why we didn’t know about Bolden, he said part of the reason is that we don’t have any recordings.

We only know about his talent because of what people said about him.

Then Marsalis said something deeper.

He said there were also black people who had a hard time celebrating jazz in the first quarter of the 20th century.

He said black folk in the church didn’t fully appreciate it because they considered it “worldly.” It was the devil’s music.

But he didn’t stop there.

He also said educated African Americans in black colleges and universities (HBCUs) didn’t fully embrace jazz in its earliest days.

Marsalis relayed stories from his father who said students would be kicked out of the band room in HBCUs if they were playing jazz.

You see, educated African Americans back then were understandably trying to show they were equally sophisticated.

And some of them had internalized the white standards around them.

So in the early 20th century they emphasized classical music.

Now think about that for a moment.

Here you have great black institutions, with some of our best minds, but they couldn’t appreciate this new musical invention by people who looked like them.

These educated African Americans were prejudiced against this new art form because of their internalized biases.

They missed it!

My mind also goes back to Martin Luther in the 1500s.

He ignited the Reformation with his religious protest in 1517.

He was a man of great learning and courage. He was an insightful interpreter of Holy Scripture.

Yet, when Galileo came long, Martin Luther missed it.

He called Galileo foolish. He called him an “upstart astrologer.”

Luther thought it was obvious than the earth stood still and the sun moved.

Luther quoted Joshua chapter 10 where God made the sun stand still.

Luther remembered verses that describe God laying the earth’s cornerstone (Job 38:6).

Luther remembered the verses that say God established the earth’s foundations (Psalm 104:5; Isaiah 45:18).

Luther not only had the Bible. He had his eyes. He could see the sun move across the horizon every day.

For Luther, then, Galileo was misguided. Galileo was wrong.

But in retrospect, who missed it?

When we look back, 500 years later, it was Luther who missed it.

When I was in a very conservative seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, I read about learned men in the South before the Civil War.

I read about Presbyterian scholars like Robert Lewis Dabney and James Henry Thornwell.

These men read Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. These were the best and the brightest in the South.

Yet, when it came to slavery, they missed it.

When it came to seeing past their prejudices and their self-interests, they missed it.

Here they were — as smart and as learned as they could be!

But it turned out that a runaway slave named Frederick Douglass, a man without formal education, was more insightful about God and the Bible than they were.

And don’t we see the same thing in our passage from Mark?

Again, you have religious people who have been studying their Bible a long time.

They were leaders in the local synagogue. They were leaders in the community.

They were well regarded. They were intelligent and well read.

Yet, when it came time to think through the Scriptures in light of human need, they missed it.

They missed it because they knew the commandment about the Sabbath, but they didn’t remember the point of the commandment.

They knew the letter but they didn’t discern the Spirit.

You see, human well-being was the point of the Sabbath commandment.

The point was that people are more important than work.

The point was that people need a break to rest and be restored.

The point was to remind people about what’s most important.

The commandment was intended to get people to stop and worship.

The commandment was intended for the good of people!

So when the Pharisees approach Jesus talking about his disciples shouldn’t pluck grain on the Sabbath, they missed it.

They missed it because they forgot that human care was the point.

They missed it because they couldn’t see pass how they had been thinking about it for years!

What about you and me today? Do we miss it?

When we talk about race, education, and crime, do we miss it?

Do we talk about dysfunctional black kids in bad neighborhoods and wonder when they’ll get their act together?

Do we talk about the people in broken neighborhoods with bleak economic prospects and wonder why they can’t dot their i’s and cross their t’s?

Do we think about these things as if the people in those neighborhoods were on the urban planning board when important decisions were made?

Do we forget how much we’ve abandoned cities, their schools, and their children?

Have we forgotten about the converging impact of white and black flight, deindustrialization, globalization, and the breakdown of unions?

Do we see that as economic opportunity decreases for whites, all of their negatives stats also go up?

Out of wedlock births are up for whites! Drug addiction up for whites! Suicides up for whites!

And on and on it goes, but we rarely talk about poor whites like they have some kind of group dysfunction.

When we do, we most likely talk about it as a class problem, not a race problem.

Yet, whether it be blacks, whites, or Latinos, we often forget that we as a collective society have created the conditions for the chaos and mayhem we see!

Just as there is personal responsibility, there is societal responsibility!

Victor Hugo said it so well:

“If the soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but the one who causes the darkness.”

Have we missed it? Are we too content with simple answer to complex questions?

Do we want answers with addition and subtraction when the deeper issues require calculus and physics?

Have we missed it?

I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to miss it! I don’t want to miss the truths that God wants to show me.

I don’t want to bear false witness against my neighbor because I was incurious!

I don’t want to stand before God and hear the Lord say, “You didn’t even try to understand. You were too content and comfortable with the ideas around you.”

I want to worship God with all of my heart, soul, and mind!

I want God to be pleased. I want God to say, “Joe Scrivner, you didn’t always get it right, but you tried. You wanted to get it right.”

I don’t want to miss it. I’ve already seen that script. I’ve seen that movie. I don’t want to be that character!

I don’t want to be Martin Luther.

I don’t want to be the educated black folk who couldn’t appreciate new music.

I don’t want to be like the educated white folk who couldn’t see slavery was wrong.

I don’t want to be like the Pharisees in our text.

I don’t want Jesus to be standing right in front of me and I miss it because I’m too blinded by my prejudices and preferences.

I don’t want to miss it!

Maybe this is part of what Fanny Crosby was saying when she wrote the words:

“Pass me not, o gentle savior. Hear my humble cry. While on others thou art calling, do not pass me by.”

I love the 2nd verse:

“Let me at thy throne or mercy, find a sweet relief. Kneeling there in deep contrition, help my unbelief.”

“Savior, savior! Hear my humble cry! While on others thou art calling, do not pass me by!”

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Hymn: “Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior” (insert)