

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B On the Gospel: Mark 1:29-39 St. Augustine's, Freeland  
February 8, 2015 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

One of the things my class had to do in my last year in Seminary in England was referred to rather innocently as a "practicum." It involved this: we were dropped off in the center of Birmingham in the middle of November. We had the equivalent of \$5 in our pockets. We were allowed no wallet, no id, no nothing. Previously we'd been taken to a thrift shop where we were allowed to pick out 1 pair of shoes, one pair of socks, one pair of pants one coat - you get the picture! So on that wet, cold day, we stood in the center of the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest city in Britain with the clothes on our back and \$2. The ground rules were these: no contacting anyone we knew for help. No help at all, in fact. We had to survive for 48 hours. For two days we were homeless; street people.

You get over any polite reticence about begging - asking strangers for money - pretty quickly! Same with asking where the local Salvation Army shelter was. And the list goes on.

All the things we take for granted in our lives were gone, including - often - a sense of personal dignity and self-worth.

You find out a lot about yourself in a setting like that!

And you find out a lot about the people who are among us all the time, especially and most obviously on the streets of our cities - the homeless.

And you find out a lot about the rest of humanity, too; the generous, kind people and the unpleasant, angry people; about the assumptions that most everyone makes.

Not much has changed on those Birmingham streets since those two days in 1976 - I'm often reminded of that comment Jesus made in Mark and Matthew's gospels: "the poor you will have with you always."

One of the most powerful songs I've ever heard is about those poor - sung by an English folk singer named Ralph McTell - here are two of the verses of that song

*Have you seen the old man in the closed-down market/kicking up the paper with his worn-out shoes?/In his eyes you'll see no pride,/hands held loosely at his side/yesterday's paper telling yesterdays' news.*

*Have you seen the old girl who walks the streets of London/dirt in her hair and her clothes in rags?/She's no time for talking,/she just keeps right on walking/carrying her home in two [paper] bags.*

Not just London; they're here, too - in Seattle; even on the island. We just don't see them so easily. But when you do, well, "In (their) eyes you'll see no pride," they are very much like "yesterday's paper telling yesterdays' news." In our disposable society these are disposable

people, surplus to our needs, people who, in the eyes of many, are truly the expendable.

In today's gospel, those people sit with Jesus. They have the same ailments we recognize, just described differently – demon possession then, bi-polar disease or schizophrenia today. And, of course, all the other maladies that afflict the poor because they can't afford appropriate medical care.

As we listen to today's readings these people sit with us as current reminders - just as the readings are ancient reminders -of the depth and the broadness of human need in our world; of the brokenness that is a greater part of being human than any of us really wants to admit.

The homeless on our streets are just the most extreme examples of what it means – in part, anyway – to be human. Not only do these people sit with us, at some time or another they are us; or, maybe I should say, we are them: in need of healing, in need of having demons cast out from us, in need of care, of love, of embrace, of community.

One of the things that's most remarkable about human beings is that we can be at our best when things are at their worst. To be so requires of us a commitment and an act of will. We have to make a choice. Will we be with those who need healing in some meaningful way?

Because the opposite can also be true: we can be at our worst when things are at their worst. "Walking by on the other side" - a description assigned in the gospels to those from whom Jesus' listeners might reasonably have expected a different response - walking by on the other side is actually a very human response: don't get involved, turn away, pretend you didn't see - it's all so much easier, so much safer, so much more – well – 'normal.'

In today's gospel - there's a direct and meaningful response to the plight of those in need, and that response comes from God. We see and hear of God *healing*, of God acting to restore the wholeness of creation *through human beings*, healing the pains that make up human existence *through* people of faith.

There's an old story about a sailor – a man of great faith – who finds himself run onto the rocks of a treacherous sea coast - he's in danger of drowning. So he prays to God, knowing that God will save him. Another boat comes by, and hails him, offering help. But he replied, saying "thanks but no need" – God would do a great thing - an amazing act - and save him. Likewise the same response when a search-and-rescue helicopter came by. But much to his surprise, the man drowned. And he found that he was standing in front of God. "Why didn't you help me?" the man cried out in anguish. "What more could you want?" God replied, "I sent you another boat and a helicopter?!"

In this world we live in we aren't onlookers watching God act; we're participants in God's work on healing in the world, we share that work. Remember that quote from Holocaust survivor Yehuda Bauer? "Thou shalt not be a victim, thou shalt not be a perpetrator, but, above all, thou shalt not be a bystander."

The most significant thing about Ralph McTell's song isn't the verses, as moving and heartfelt as they are; it's the chorus, which goes like this:

***“So how can you tell me your lonely, or say for you that the Sun don't shine? Let me take you by the hand and lead you through the streets of London; I'll show you something to make you change your mind.”*** The realities of our world are often so much worse than the one we inhabit; the suffering of ordinary people so much more devastating, so much more painful, so much more soul-destroying.

One of the great ironies of life is that when we help them we find that we help ourselves too. When we switch our focus away from Self and to Other its often we who are transformed even as they are helped.

Suffering, distress, all those experiences and emotions that can grasp and try to strangle us - they're real AND they relative. If we focus only on ourselves we miss the real work that we as Christians have been given to do, which very much involves be co-creators – partners – in the renewing of the earth – including ourselves.                    AMEN.

