

Stretched

On the heels of his invitations to the fishermen last week, Jesus begins preaching and healing, and word begins to spread. He carves out moments for solitary prayer and rest, but as word spreads, the people increasingly crowd in and around him. They are curious and hungry and wondering who he is and what he is about. Last week was Epiphany Sunday, the day our tradition links to the arrival of the Magi, the ones who come from far away led by the guiding light of a star. Different Christian traditions then observe the season of Epiphany while others begin Ordinary Time. There are good reasons for both, but this year it seems fitting for us to linger under the star's light for a bit longer, to welcome the time and space for that heavenly light to help us see more clearly just who Jesus is—not who we want him to be, not who we assume him to be, not who we think he should be, but to blink a bit and let the light and the Spirit show us who is truly is instead. That is what the season of Epiphany is about really, and the writer of Mark is a fitting guide. Between now and Transfiguration Sunday at the end of February, Mark is declaring—to all who are paying attention—who this Jesus is and what he comes to do and be. [Read Mark 2:1-22]

It's starting to catch up with me. Somehow 50 wasn't so painful, but 51 has found me with a few more aches and twinges, not the least of which is in my hamstrings. I finally let go of my denial that the muscles on the back of my legs would just fix themselves and grudgingly made an appointment to see a doctor this past week. She very kindly encouraged me to keep running while also insisting that I need to do a better job of stretching. Yes, yes. I need to stretch, to warm up my tight legs and help them do what I want them to just do. But I was also reminded that some soreness is good, because in order to become stronger, muscles have to tear just a bit. Without the stretching, without the little tears, there is no growth, no chance of doing what helps me and my body thrive.

In last week's text, we covered a lot of ground. One piece that we moved fairly quickly through was the moment after Jesus' baptism when the heavens were split, torn apart as the Spirit dives down upon him and he hears God declare that he is God's beloved Son. We tend to think—or at least I tend to think of that scene as a beautifully serene one, but it is more forceful than that. In Jesus any barrier between heaven and earth is torn open. It is beautiful and powerful, and it is messy and jarring. And it is just the beginning.

Mark tells us that the crowds keep growing. Jesus returns to Capernaum to be greeted by so many people that there is hardly room to breathe, let alone carry in a man on a mat. Then comes more tearing. The man's friends get

creative, digging or tearing open a hole in the roof of the house to get their friend to Jesus. But the tearing does not end there. Jesus' first response is to tell the man that his sins are forgiven. The religious powers are thrown just a bit. This is not the way it is done. Only God can forgive. Yes, only God can forgive. Can you feel the room that Jesus' words open up? Can you sense how he stretches that place, creating more room for everyone to breathe? We hear that declaration of God's forgiveness in Christ week in and week out, so much so that I think we tend to discount how earth shaking it is. Can you imagine how those words rang in the man's ears? In the crowd's ears? It is not that the man's physical ailment is caused by some sin he committed. The text does not say that at all. The man does not stand up and walk at that point. It is Jesus' recognition that healing and wholeness is not only about the physical, but about the entire person. The man confesses nothing, at least not in our hearing, and Jesus declares him forgiven, and tears away a bit more of the brokenness, the hurt, the fractured pieces of this man's life and begins to weave him back in. Jesus also restores his ability to walk. But the tears in the way things are done, in the fabric of the community's expectations come first.

Jesus then walks out by the sea and invites Levi, the tax collector to follow him. Again, Jesus is tearing at the fabric of what is right, what is expected. And those who have been the ones to hold the fragile community together, those who have tended to the fraying edges of a people who have almost always been under siege and on the margins are the ones who fight the tears and the rips. We are often quick to point fingers at the Pharisees for their silly, petty, misguided ways. And Mark does, too. But as soon as we start to align ourselves with the people who immediately "get" Jesus, as the people who roll out the welcome mat for the changes he brings, we gloss over our own resistance to how his intrusion calls us to change and how his presence challenges us to grow, how his arrival on the scene causes us to question who is in and who is out and what is crucial to the life of faith.

A few years back a program began looking at the stubborn problem of chronic homelessness in Portland, Oregon. Like the ministry of Family Promise here in Harrisburg, Paul Schroeder and other founders of the New City Initiative proposed a different way to approach those who kept returning to the streets:

'When [we] think about issues like homelessness, very often our minds go to emergency services' — to the immediate need of providing food, shelter and clothing... 'As a general rule, people do not become homeless when they run out of money,' Schroeder [says]. 'People become homeless when they run out of

relationships. When people generally hit bottom and become homeless is when their entire network of relationships — every thread in that network — has snapped.¹

Something is already tattered and torn for those who find themselves without a place to call home. And a bit of tearing and reworking is required to bring healing, to usher in a solution. Congregations have to tear away the boundary between those they rub shoulders with in the pews and chat with over coffee during fellowship time and those who would not even think to darken the door of their churches. In response to an invitation, eight Presbyterian congregations were among the communities of faith:

[Who made] a financial commitment as well as an emotional one. To encourage families making the transition, participating congregations help set up and furnish apartments; write supportive notes; visit the families; and provide practical assistance — in one case organizing a carpool of volunteer church members so a child could attend an after-school art program.²

It is simpler to try to patch the tears with food, temporary shelter, and a blanket or two, but when relationships are formed something new and rich and holy is created, something that can hold and embrace the abundant life God intends for all of us, for those in the middle and those on the margins. Because it is not only the volunteers who have to risk some tears. Those who have been on the edges and in the shadows have to find a way to trust that these relationships will hold, that these communities rallying around them will not fray and snap like those they have known before. So it is a different thing for everyone to peel away the barriers and the boundaries, to enter into relationship and build something newer, stronger, messier, and more faithful in its place together.

I don't think Jesus is bent on tearing us or the traditions we treasure to shreds. He himself is faithful to all that God has called his people to be. He wants us to be faithful, too, so he pushes us to be torn open a bit, to stretch and make room in ourselves and in our communities for the new thing, the redemptive thing he is trying to do in and through us. He sits at table with tax collectors and sinners. He hangs out with all the wrong people. He speaks forgiveness to the broken and brings healing to every single hurting soul, including ours. And each time he does, something in us is torn, stretched, and transformed into something new, something more holy, something more like the kingdom that comes near in Christ.

¹ Leslie Scanlon, <https://pres-outlook.org/2013/02/finding-ways-to-pour-faith-into-new-vessels-of-need/>, as quoted by the Rev. Dr. Anna Pinckney Straight in her paper for the Well, 2016.

² Scanlon

Because in case we missed it, I think Jesus wants to fill us, to fill the whole world with new life. That new wine reference is not just a helpful metaphor. Wine indicates feasting and abundance, joy and celebration. Jesus comes to bring rich, abundant life to those who need it, to bring healing for those who are hurting. When we cling too tightly to the life we are holding together, when we refuse to let him tear it open a bit, when we resist the new thing he wants to do, we forget that we are hungry and in need of healing, too. If we insist so strongly that we are righteous, we miss the healing we long for and need, for as we say each and every Sunday, all have fallen short, including each and every one of us. To be righteous means we are in right relationship with our neighbor and with God. We cannot pull that off on our own, or we haven't found a way so far. And the year ahead promises to test those relationships, too. We will be stretched in the face of political differences, racial tensions, poverty and wealth disparity, and concerns about the climate, just to name a few. And when we are pushed, will we instinctively mutter because the new thought or movement is different from what we have held to be an absolute, or will we find a way to wonder, to consider if perhaps we are being stretched into something new? It is true that not every new thing is part of the kingdom or part of God's transformation of the world. But sadly too often, we—or at least I wind up responding like old wineskins, who do not and cannot fully embrace the new thing Jesus wants to do in us because we do not have enough give, enough stretch to welcome the ways he wants to make us and the world new. The writer Anne Lamott once wrote, "I do not understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us."³ Grace has met us in Jesus. Grace has come in Christ, and he refuses to leave us where we are. What might Jesus be looking to tear away in us? Where are we being asked to stretch? How does Jesus want to do a new thing in us? What or who stands in the way?

So maybe I will listen to the doctors' orders, the one in Camp Hill in a white coat, and the one here, too. They are both right. I do need to stretch. I need to *be* stretched, too. I need to be pulled beyond my comfort zone. I need to be torn open, or my stubbornly held notions of what is good and right and holy do. It will hurt to let my muscles be torn and stretched, but in that tearing and stretching, by the grace of God, I and we can continue becoming the new creation Jesus is so determined to make in and through us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³ Anne Lamott, in her book *Traveling Mercies*: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/45081-i-do-not-understand-the-mystery-of-grace----only>