

First Presbyterian Church of Watertown

Mark 2.1-12
“Body and Soul”
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During the Civil War there were a number of hymns or songs written for the soldiers. Perhaps the most popular was a song for the North, “John Brown’s Body.” The song is set to the tune used for the Battle Hymn of the Republic. Unlike the Battle Hymn that speaks of lilies and beauty, John Brown’s body, “lies molderin’ in the grave.” Not a pleasant image.

The South had songs as well. Dixie of course; but the Confederate soldiers also had Maryland, My Maryland and the Bonnie Blue Flag. The Bonnie Blue Flag calls for “bands of brothers” to rally round a flag with one white star and in Maryland there is a shout to see “The despot’s heel is on thy shore . . . his torch is at thy temple door.”

Each of the songs were a call to fight, to defend, to give one’s life. Yet, the one song that seems to capture not only the call to arms, but also the spirit of the division was written by Stephen Foster shortly before his death. He wrote,

We live in hard and stirring times,
Too sad for mirth, too rough for rhymes;
For songs of peace have lost their chimes,
And that’s what’s the matter!
The men we held as brothers true
Have turned into a rebel crew;
So now we have to put them thro’,
And that’s what’s the matter!
That’s what’s the matter,
The rebels have to scatter;
We’ll make them flee, by land and sea,
And that’s what’s the matter!

Walking through the battlefields of Gettysburg last year an image weighed heavy on me. Near the Peach Orchard, late on the night before the last day, legend has it that a young confederate soldier began to sing. His voice pierced the night and ran through his camp and reached the union camps just a short distance away. What he sang though was not a battle song, he didn't sing Dixie or The Yellow Rose of Texas, he sang a common tune, a hymn all would know. The story goes that the two camps joined their voices and sang the hymn though. Exhausted and broken, immersed in the dead and dying, the remnant sang and for just a moment beauty pierced the weight of sorrow.

There is something about the common tune, the joining of voices, the harmony that seems ever before us and yet ever illusive. That is what I take from the lyrics of Stephen Foster, the "songs of peace have lost their chimes." To lose the shared voice, the shared hope is to lose the song of peace that binds us together.

In 1845, more than fifteen years before the Civil War, John Fawcett wrote a hymn that would become very popular. Perhaps the popularity was found in the way its theme seemed discordant with the times. He wrote:

Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.
Before our Father's throne,
We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one,
Our comforts, and our cares.
We share our mutual woes,
Our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.
When we asunder part,
It gives us inward pain;
But we shall still be joined in heart,
And hope to meet again.

The line that gets me today is: "often for each other flows the sympathizing tear." In the seventeen years between Fawcett's Tie that Binds and Foster's That's What's the Matter I want to say what changed were those tears. In 1862 gone was sympathy and a fierce resolve took its place. Gone was patience and courtesy and in its place came the decision to "run them through." The image of the sympathetic tear gets close to me today because I fear we are losing such in our communities and in our nation. Sympathy seems ever fleeting; and in its place is a pitched disdain, a climate of ridicule and hatred.

Our reading today is meant to fight such a climate. The story we read is the first of five in a set meant to change the tune of the early church. The set is a very precise literary arrangement. This is unique for the Gospel of Mark who so often seems to revel in the absence of a contrived order. But our reading today, and the next four that follow, is part of a series of controversies. Each has a unique feature and place in the set, but what binds them together is hatred, anger, rancor, and division. It is as if Mark is trying to bring a mirror in these five stories, put a mirror to the early church to let them see their anger.

While it is always important when reading a gospel to look around, to see where a story is placed, here it is key. Mark, in essence, front loads his gospel with a series of controversies; he throws the reader into a battle, the church's battle.

When I preached on this passage at Casey's ordination, I tried to suggest that Mark was placing two competing images of the early church before us. The story of the paralytic, at the home of Jesus, is told with two competing images. One is the image of the men tearing apart a roof so to lower the pallet of their friend; the other image, the other side, is the Pharisees grumbling and powerless. The first image is a beautiful one; the second one is ugly. One is about risk and sacrifice and hope; the other is about control and fear and vanity and anger. It is as if Mark wants you to see a good image of the church, what it is meant to be, and a bad image of what it becomes with division.

Recently I listened to a retiring pastor preach. His sermon text was Moses looking into the promise land from Mt. Nebo. It is an awful, painful image. Moses has brought the people through the wilderness, but is told he cannot enter. He must die in the desert. This passage is built on competing images as well. The image of the desert and the promise land stand juxtaposed.

The sermon of the retiring pastor lamented the last fifty years of the Presbyterian Church. He inferred that it was a kind of wandering, a time of being lost. One got a sense that he was like Moses peering into a promise land he would not enter.

He spoke of the fights: Civil Rights, women's rights, and the rights of the homosexual. Each one was a moment where the church tore each other apart, where we lost the "sympathizing tear." His career was dominated by rancor and pitched battles.

Although a bit bleak for sure, I took comfort in this. For his message was that the time in the desert was over. The time of rancor was fading.

This is the image of the denomination I offered to you a month ago. The time of church division and rancor is ending. Instead of Mt. Nebo, I used our passage suggesting the time of the Pharisees arguing was being put aside for the image of the friends who seek to offer healing.

I enjoyed hearing a shared vision of the past. Yet, what really excited me was the conclusion of the retiring pastor, the great hope in the next generation. It is not enough to end the debate, to lay aside the image of the Pharisees. Yes, the battle flags are being put away and we are entering a time where the chimes of peace can be heard again. But what is most important is that the next generation can see a different church.

He spoke of the next generation just as I spoke of Casey and Julia, Drew and Zoe. The church is battered and torn, but a new day is beginning. And the beginning is this: we are going to become a place of healing body and soul. We are going to find the power of forgiveness and the power of compassion. We will heal body and soul as we put aside our arrogance and pride; we will follow Jesus in meekness demanding allegiance from no one.

Jesus asks the Pharisees, what is easier to say your sins are forgiven (heal the soul) or pick up your pallet and walk (heal the body)? The Pharisees cannot answer because they can do neither. This powerlessness is the theme for the controversies yet to come. They are powerless to do either. Mark wants to say: in your divisions you become powerless.

It could be that we have been so long in the din of division we can no longer hear ourselves; the lines of division are so well worn we cannot imagine the world without them. This is what Mark was trying to put before the early church. They had learned to sing battle hymns. He wanted to change their tune to the hymns of peace.

In our reading today, Mark is trying perhaps to change our tune. He is offering a new song. I hear the newness when I read the apostolic letters of Peter and Paul and James. I hear the anger and division of the early church when Paul writes to the Galatians, "When Cephas came to Antioch I rebuked him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; you foolish Galatians who has bewitched you." Reading Mark next to this letter I can hear the divisions and strife, people getting into each others' faces and giving it too them again and again. Mark is here to say, that is not what the church needs to be. Jesus came to heal body and soul not to take a side in our vanity.

We are, right now, changing our tune. The impulse for the battle is waning. I dare say we are like the young confederate soldier who put aside the battle hymns for a common tune to sing by the Peach Orchard, finding beauty in the moment of destruction. I believe this is the greatest gift the churches of America could offer to our nation right now. We need to find the "sympathizing tear" and put aside the impulse to "run them through." We need to find chimes of peace and sing them more and more.

That is what I hope for us. The next generation of the church will not be free of problems. Things will be herky jerky and people will sing out of tune. But the new song, or perhaps the old song of ties that bind, will be heard. Beauty will rise where rancor stood, healing will replace violence. I am just glad I am not retiring yet; I get to be a part of it. I long to see the church Mark envisioned, a church that heals body and soul, a church that brings the broken to Jesus no matter the challenge or the cost, a church with a common tune. Amen.