

The Heavens Ripped Open

Lynette Sparks
Third Presbyterian Church
January 11, 2015 (Baptism of the Lord)
Mark 1:4-15

The scene down at the Jordan River almost feels like standing in Times Square, waiting in line outside the TKTS booth to purchase tickets for a Broadway show. So many people are in line, shoulder to shoulder and front to back. The queue winds and twists back and forth, up, down and around, like a snake. It becomes amoeba-like: a movable, shape-shifting entity. It doesn't matter how many more people join the queue. It accommodates them all, even corrals them, line dweller after line dweller. There they go, one after another after another... inching... slowly...and deliberately... toward the river bank, toward the main event taking place down in the Jordan River.

A seemingly endless line of humanity has come from the whole countryside. Permit me a little creative license to fill out the scene a bit. There's a guy in flannel pants and sweatshirt, who looks like he just rolled out of bed, hasn't shaved, and didn't get his morning coffee. There's a perfectly coiffed lawyer, dressed to the nines in her impeccable suit and shoes to die for. There's a harried mom holding a baby in one arm and dragging along a drippy-nosed toddler with the other. There's an elderly couple who just don't move as fast as they used to. Some folks are covered with tattoos and piercings. Some just got off work; others always let someone else do the work for them. They're all in line – people of every race and ethnicity, language and culture. People of every gender identity, every political persuasion and every family configuration. They are small and large; tired and hyperactive. They are the urban chic, and the down-home salt of the earth. Some are grimy and sweaty; others immaculate and well-groomed. Some wounds are visible; many more are invisible.

And the line-dwellers have done it all. One's price-gouged his customers. Another's paid substandard wages. Yet another dumped toxic chemicals into waterways. Many in line worship the trinity of "me, myself, and I." Some think too much of themselves; others too little of themselves. Still others live lives devoid of gratitude. Some exploit the vulnerable; others simply bypass them. Hatred, lies, greed, envy, prejudice, divisiveness, scorn, disdain, and indifference – oh so much indifference. The line-dwellers have done it all, or left it all undone, as the case may be. They bump and jostle one another; scuffles break out here and there.

And still, that mass of broken, wounded humanity moves one by one to the river, responding to the call of John the Baptist to "Confess your sins, repent and be baptized; let your lives be washed clean and your sins forgiven."

Much of this morning's liturgy comes from the Confession of Belhar, a theological affirmation that came out of South African church in the days of apartheid. I sincerely hope you will respond to Becky's invitation to remain for the 9:30am Sunday Seminar on Belhar with Cliff Kirkpatrick. Cliff has been in town all weekend, leading study sessions with clergy and members of our local Presbyterian congregations. One of the gifts of this particular theological affirmation is that it compels us to acknowledge our own sins of injustice, and ideological distortion, of exploitation and neglect, of alienation from one another, and – despite our self-

delusions – our own racism, unconscious though it may be. In these days where Ferguson, Missouri and Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Trayvon Martin remain fresh in our minds, Belhar compels us to reflect on our own places of prejudice.

A recent New York Times column by Harvard economics professor Sendhil Mullainathan reminds us of study after study that document humans' intuitive racial bias even when we have good intentions. He wrote of a research project he did, sending out thousands of résumés to employers with job openings and measured which ones were selected for callbacks or interviews. But before sending them, they randomly used stereotypically African-American names on some and stereotypically white names on others. The same résumé was roughly 50 percent more likely to result in callback for an interview if it had a stereotypically "white" name.

Other researchers sent actual people to apply for low-wage jobs. They were given identical résumés and similar interview training. They found that African-American applicants with no criminal record were offered jobs at a rate as low as white applicants who had criminal records.

Professor Mullainathan wrote that when his own résumé study came out, many of these human-resources managers were stunned, because they took pride in creating diversity. And yet, the evidence showed they were doing anything but. For even if we work to avoid discrimination, it can easily creep into what he terms our fast thinking – our snap judgments that rely on all the associations we have — from what we see or read in the media, whether in a fictional TV show or in a news story. They use stereotypes, he says, "both the accurate and the inaccurate, both those we would want to use and ones we find repulsive."

And on a larger scale, the sobering truth is that in greater Rochester, we have glaring, defacto segregation in our housing and in our public education system, to name just some. We are segregated racially and socio-economically. We carry our biases about those who live in poverty. As a community we have fallen short in seeking the collective will and imagination to create a different systemic reality of justice and equity. We all have much sin to confess, much for which to repent. We all need to stand in that line seeking repentance, which in the Biblical sense extends far beyond a verbal "I'm sorry" to the call to turn around from our old ways and go an entirely new direction.

In Mark's story, the people keep coming and coming, and John keeps proclaiming and baptizing. Then one day, Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee slips in line, incognito. He takes his place in line with all the sinners, the broken people, the wounded. He takes his place there with those who truly understand the depths of their guilt, and with the rest who, in their blissful ignorance, haven't got a clue. He takes his place in line with all of them, in solidarity with a broken and fearful world. And perhaps most astonishingly, he takes his place in line...with us.

Then, just when it seems the skies are falling down - just as Jesus comes up out of the water of his baptism, drenched to the hilt, immediately Jesus sees the heavens ripped open. Now, we all know the horror of hearing the sound of a rip in your pant leg, or a seam splitting in two. You know the sound, right? It makes you turn around and look to see what's been exposed. When Jesus' baptism tore the heavens apart, it exposed something, all right. It exposed what the prophet Isaiah long ago had prayed for – "O that you [God] would tear open the heavens and come down." This noisy, disruptive tearing open of the heavens followed by the gentle descent of the Spirit like a dove exposed God with us in Jesus Christ. God comes through the torn place. Wow. It's Mark's Epiphany story.

Now, in the middle of this wonderment, I also see a conundrum: if the church professes that Jesus was sinless, why was he baptized? God only knows, but I've wondered if perhaps in his

solidarity with humanity he needed to experience the forgiveness we need to experience, even as in his divinity he actually **was** that forgiveness.

That has big implications for Jesus' life, and for our lives. Writing in a recent *Christian Century* article, Diane Roth said that at his baptism, "Jesus is given not just an identity, but a mission – and his mission is not just comforting, but dangerous. This mission drives Jesus back to the wilderness to wrestle with the devil, and it leads him to places of suffering, chaos, and despair...The heavens torn open mean that God is somehow with us in a new way. Not that God wasn't with us before, but that something new is being born – a different kind of relationship, both dangerous and comforting...pushing [us] out to places [we] are afraid to go."

Theologian N.T. Wright also reminds us that "forgiveness is a way of life, God's way of life, God's way **to** life...it's not simply a private experience."

It's worth noting that not only in the first chapter of are the heavens torn apart and Jesus declared God's Son, the Beloved. At the **end** of Mark's gospel story, when Jesus was crucified, gave a loud cry and breathed his last, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." And the centurion said, "Truly this man was God's Son." Two tearings; two divine affirmations. Like dramatic bookends to Mark's story of the in-breaking of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

I wish I remembered who it was that wrote what I am about to tell you, and where I read it. I didn't write it down at the time and I haven't been able to find it again. Whoever it was said she believed the most powerful part of a worship service, and therefore her favorite part, is the confession sequence in the liturgy – the part that begins with the call to confession of sin and ends with the assurance of pardon. Better even than a sermon! I hadn't really thought about that before. And it seems to me she's on to something. It is the scandal of the gospel in its entirety.

Take a look at today's prayer of confession in the bulletin that we prayed together. As a church together we acknowledged our hatred, bitterness, and enmity; our disunity, prejudice, fear, selfishness, and unbelief. We confessed that we hold on to unjust ideologies; we deny the reconciling power of the gospel; we claim a false peace; we alienate ourselves from one another; and we refuse to pursue reconciliation.

These are weighty matters. In our weekly prayer of confession, we lay bare the reality of ourselves, stripped of all illusions. We speak the truth that none of us is worthy to stand in God's holy presence without the grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ. We sin individually and communally, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have refused to bear the burdens of others; we have ignored the pain of the world, and passed by the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed.

We say all of this. And then we sing Lord, have mercy upon us; Christ, have mercy upon us; Lord, have mercy upon us.

It is the height of drama and tension; it is the cliffhanger that leaves us breathless for the next episode; "will she or won't she survive?" Will God or won't God forgive?

And then...the powerful words from Scripture that God's mercy is from everlasting to everlasting. The One who is in a position to condemn is also the One who died for us, rose for us, reigns in power for us, and prays for us. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation; the old life has passed away; a new life has begun. Friends, believe the good news: in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Amen.