‘Kneading’ Toward Liberation

Service Description:

‘Kneading’ Toward Liberation

Many of us grew up hearing the story in the Gospels of Jesus ‘healing’ the blind man. Some traditions emphasize that Jesus’s miracle was the most important part of this story. I beg to differ. Presented by Cameron Young, UUA Congregational Life Staff, Southern Region.

Recommended Reading

John 9:1-12

A Man Born Blind Receives Sight

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. **2** His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” **3** Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. **4** We[a] must work the works of him who sent me[b] while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. **5** As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” **6** When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, **7** saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. **8** The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” **9** Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am he.” **10** But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” **11** He answered, “The

man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” 12 They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

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My friends, what are you willing to risk so that all can be liberated?

This is the question that Jesus poses to us through action in John 9 and all throughout the gospels. Though admittedly, there are as many interpretations of the gospels as there are readers, this is the question that echoed loudest to me. While it varies, oftentimes bringing a text from the Bible into a Unitarian Universalist pulpit gets mixed reactions. Some may wonder why I picked this. It’s worth a reminder that both Unitarianism and Universalism began as self-identified Christian religions, and Jewish-Christian texts are still very alive in our faith. Though we may have distanced ourselves theologically with most Christian religions, it’s still at our core and we must contend with our heritage- the good, the bad, and the ugly. Though we may not take the Bible literally, we still very much take it seriously.

And the Gospel of John in particular, has a lot to teach us about moving in solidarity with the marginalized. In this text, Jesus encounters a blind man living on the margins of society- tolerated so long as he knows his place and admits his sinfulness. In this time in ancient Jerusalem, it was widely believed that a person’s physical disabilities were a result of their own sins and the sins of their family, a superstition that oppressed people for millennia.

This passage certainly is worth interrogating for some of its sentiments around disability. The dichotomy between literal *blindness* as being deficient and literal *seeing* as being healed may not resonate well with many individuals who are blind. But it seems that even Jesus addressed this in the passage, “he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” The blind man in John 9 reminds me of many folks today living on the margins of society. The homeless schizophrenic woman ridiculed on the street. The disabled veteran hooked on opioids. The black, trans sex worker. Sometimes these people are even invited into community- particularly religious community- but are tokenized- and asked not to bring their full selves. Our black indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) religious professionals often talk about having to code switch at our UU congregations, many of which are predominately white and upper middle class. In other words, having to talk, look, and act differently to be accepted. Many of those folks, because they rely on these very communities for support, swallow it, just as this blind man does.

What if people’s differences could, instead, be acknowledged as gifts and seen for the fullness of their humanity? For them to be free of that marginalization from those with privilege who see those differences as a threat? Such a world is depicted in the bible as the Kingdom, or as feminist theologians like to say, *Kin*-dom of God. It’s also what Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of when referring to the Beloved Community. As a Universalist who believes that salvation is for the living, that *Kin*-dom of God is for us here on Earth, and that faith is helping to live that into reality. But as Jesus, his disciples, *and* the blind man show us, that often takes confronting the powers that be.

The Jesus of the gospels performs wondrous miracles, including raising Lazarus from the dead later in the Gospel of John with just a simple prayer. However, in this gospel, Jesus spits on dirt, kneads it into mud, rubs it on the man's eyes, tells him to go bathe in the pool of Siloam (a spring used to purify oneself to enter the Temple), and only *then* can he see. Why would John's Jesus, who can probably heal the man instantaneously, go to so much trouble?

It's noted here that this passage takes place on the sabbath day, where Hebraic law restricts any type of work, which the act of *kneading* (like what a baker does with dough) is considered to be. Not only does Jesus perform a miracle so that this man can escape oppression and be freed to into the fold of God, but he performatively breaks Hebraic law. And the Pharisees notice, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath," they say. The actions of Jesus here are what we might call civil disobedience today.

When we talk about the marginalized, it's also important to recognize the difference between advocacy *for* and advocacy w*ith*. The blind man goes from a passive recipient in this story to co-conspirator. The Pharisees first interrogate his parents. Too afraid to stand up to them, they throw him under the bus, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." Knowing the risks, however, the man himself confronts them, even inviting them into discipleship. "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" He is rejected and cast out for speaking his prophetic truth but

ultimately is embraced into the community of Jesus. As for Jesus, this was one of the many instances where he confronts institutional authority that led to his ultimate crucifixion.

So what does this mean for us? While perhaps we're not ready to become martyrs, or even go to jail for civil disobedience (although some do feel that call), how can we use our systemic privilege so that those in our communities such as the blind man can find their own liberation? I know a pastor whose church recently had a large sum of money from their endowment, and instead of re-investing it or letting it sit there, they used it to pay off crippling medical debt for those living in poverty in their city. Not all in the church were happy about the decision, and leadership took heat. In corporate meetings, studies have widely documented that men speak the majority of the time, regardless of the gender makeup of the group. I know a man who is a senior member of his company that, when he sees that the non-male voices have not been adequately asked for feedback, calls it out, to some of his colleagues' chagrin, helping all voices at the table be heard. A Unitarian Universalist church in Louisville Kentucky, mostly white and affluent, offered their building as a sanctuary space for predominately black protestors after the police shooting of Breonna Taylor in her own home. Protestors were getting tear gassed and arrested for breaking curfew, but the church was protected by the state and federal law. That didn't stop them from becoming targets of the police, however. In each of these instances, people used their position in society, despite fears of backlash. And in each of these instances, these people found more of their own humanity in the process.

What we're shown in John 9, however, is that creating the beloved community can happen in the here and now. It doesn't require a shiny building (there was no building for Jesus and his disciples), a big, sophisticated program, a large endowment, or a requirement that we show up as our perfect selves all the time (we won't). In fact, as we see in this passage, those things can hold you back. The instinct of self and community preservation is fundamentally the oppressive force in this text. This invitation into liberatory community is one which simply requires us to love one another r*adically* and a*s we are.* And love those who we might've perceived as *outsiders* as *ourselves*. Our covenants empower us to call one another in when we're falling short of that aim, just as the blind man does here to his own community. This is realizable regardless of congregational circumstance.

My friends, what are you willing to risk so that *all* can be liberated?