

PANEM ET CIRCENSES

Psalm 119:105-112 / Matthew 13:1-17

When I did my clinical rotation at *Brackenridge Hospital* in Austin, TX during my third year in seminary, my supervisor was this crusty guy who, prior to coming to Austin, was a chaplain in the Chicago police department—homicide division. To say that he had “seen it all” is probably an understatement. Pete, let’s call him, was terse, a little scary—ok very scary—but also very kind. What drove me batty about Pete was that he never gave me a straight answer. Instead, he would recline behind his desk, feet on the desk, and tell me a story. At first, I listened to him for a while and as he droned on, I tuned him out. When I asked the same question again and he began to tell me the very same story, he got my attention. What I learned from Pete was that more often than not, I already knew the answer to my question. I just needed to learn how to listen.

Pete had a narrative pedagogical approach, we would say today. Or, rather, Pete taught by telling stories. He was one of the most formative persons in my theological education as he most clearly embodied Jesus’s divine pedagogy for me. I also gained a deeper appreciation for the disciples’

frustration when they got a story instead of an answer from their rabbi. “Why do you tell stories?” the disciples asked. “Because you have God-blessed eyes—eyes that can see! And God-blessed ears—ears that can hear!” Jesus replied.

If it were only that simple. But we know that nothing is ever simple when it comes to Jesus and his parables, or faith stories. If it is true that we do have “eyes to see and ears to hear,” how is it that we have such a hard time doing just that? How is it that we favor certain stories over others? We *can* see and we *can* hear, but do we make use of these God-given abilities?

The Psalmist is helpful here. “Everything is falling apart on me,” she cries out to God. “I keep trying to figure things out on my own, keep trying to make my own destiny. And on top of that, a lot of people try to throw me off balance.” When chaos swirls around us, the Psalmist points out, it is very hard to concentrate on seeing and hearing. If this were difficult for someone who wrote these words thousands of years ago, it is even more difficult for us today. We are inundated by visual stimuli—TV, computer screens, cell phones. We are bombarded by picture after picture after picture. And we are inundated by a clamor and din which is ratcheted up by social media. In this

cacophony of voices that vie for our attention by constantly screaming at us, how can we see, how can we hear what God wants us to see and to hear?

Our current divisive situation—in our churches, in our country, and in our world—reminds me of ancient Rome whose almighty power began to show cracks and fissures at the turn of the first into the second century of the *Common Era*. The poet Juvenal coined a phrase, “panem et circuses,” to characterize what was happening in Roman society at the time. “Bread and games,” full stomachs and the barbaric spectacle of gladiators forced to butcher each other for people’s entertainment in the arena of the Coliseum ruled the day. No longer did Roman citizens care for their civic duties which were the backbone of their empire, such as voting rights and care for the needy amongst them. They gave away their birthright like Esau did for a bowl of cereal and death as a spectator sport.

I wonder how the Roman “bread-and-games-mindset might speak to our current times? A lot of people make a lot of noise these days, and so I wonder: What is it that you and I are *not* supposed to pay attention to? Are we, like the ancient Romans, satisfied enough with our own lives as long as we have what we need? With our God-given ears to hear, how are we

listening to the cries of pain and injustice that have been rising? And with our God-given eyes to see, how are we seeing how everything around us seems to be falling apart? Are we, too, like Esau ready to trade-in our birthright for a bowl of sugary cereal that gives us a short-term rush but has no nutrients to sustain us?

As we circle around these questions, the Psalmist calls us back. “Slow down, take a deep breath. In these dark times, take the lamp into your hand, which is God’s word, and let God guide you. Slowly, step by step, putting one foot in front of the other.” What we discovered together in our Zoom Bible study last Wednesday was that lamps in those days cannot be compared with lamps today. The Psalmist had no halogen flood lights available to turn night into day. Rather, she had to use oil lamps which were dim and flickered in the slightest breeze, always threatened to be extinguished. It was a fragile light, barely enough to make out what was out front while walking at night.

It is a good reminder that we cannot take it for granted that God’s word will light the way for us. We need to commit to it. And then re-commit and re-commit to it. The Psalmist knows this as she makes her pledge: “The wicked do their best to throw me off track, but I don’t swerve an inch from your

course. I inherited your book on living; it's mine forever—what a gift! And how happy it makes me! I concentrate on doing what you say—I always have and always will.”

This is essentially also what Jesus tries to teach his disciples by telling them stories, or parables if you will. “Why do you tell us these stories?” the disciples want to know. “Because you have been given a glimpse of God’s kingdom. You know how it works and you know what to do. But your hearts must be ready to receive it, to see and listen and pay attention. If you are not ready, you can’t accomplish anything. And that is why I tell stories: to get you ready and to nudge people toward making a better world for all people. And so it is your responsibility to go and tell my stories of God’s love, mercy, grace, and justice to others.”

That is why Jesus tells the parable of the sower and the seed. We often get so concerned whether we are part of the road, the weeds, the gravel, or whether we belong to the good fertile soil. And we definitely want to be good soil. We are frequently concerned how others might judge us, how they might judge our faith, and by focusing on ourselves we take the eye off God’s kingdom and the service of others. But Jesus in his parable does not want to

talk about us. Jesus wants to talk about God's Kingdom. "You have been given insight into God's Kingdom. Don't get distracted by all the noise around you. Don't let yourselves be faked out by those who do not want you to pay attention to what is really going on and who want to feed you with cheap entertainment. You are citizens, citizens of God's Kingdom. So go, take my lamp, my word, and inch forward in these dark times, putting one foot in front of the other. You'll know when you arrive at where you are supposed to be going. You'll know it because I'll be there to greet you."

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