

**God Shrinks that We Might not be Torn**  
**based on Mark 2:13-22, David Jahnke, 2/15/15**

So as we continue this week in the gospel of Mark, I would like to open with a personal story from the great theologian Jurgen Moltmann. It was the end of WWII and he was a German prisoner of war in Scotland. He was shown many photographs of the horrors of Belson and Buchenwald. And as he was dealing with the realization that they were indirectly responsible for unimagined atrocities, a chaplain distributed copies of the Bible. He did not have a Christian background but when he opened up to Mark, he read it all in one sitting—and now in Moltmann's words now:

“I... came to the story of the passion. When I read Jesus' death cry of ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’, I felt growing within me [this] conviction: ‘this is someone who understands you completely; who is with you in your cry to God and who has felt the same forsakenness you are living in now...I was slowly but surely seized by a great hope for the resurrection into God's wide space where there is no more cramping.’ [Moltmann's Autobiography]

So the young German learned that he had been a part of the holocaust of God's people, if only indirectly. He felt cramped and lost. But the Word of God got to him in his despair and taught him God's compassion. And if a Roman centurion who had been a part of Jesus' killing could be made new, so could Moltmann. And he ended up becoming one of the most important theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The cross teaches us that even though we all participate in God's death and the death of God's children, God is always with us and never stops loving us. Jesus' life revealed this as well. He came to save all who are lost in destructive ways and those forsaken by the world. That means all of us, on a basic level. But Jesus distinguishes between the righteous and the sinful in today's passage. And many of us are basically on a path of righteousness after being raised with love, grace, truth, prosperity. Many others, however, have been brought up with next to nothing, not only materially but with little mental, emotional or spiritual nourishment. They feel chronically cramped and confined, as Moltmann did.

In our small group the other night, we were talking about why people put so much focus on what others think of them. And a dear soul spoke to how she was teased when she was growing up for her buck teeth and that maybe people get concerned about what others think because they have been put down during their childhood.

This points to how being put down leads to further broken-ness. When negativity is instilled in young people, they start to believe the lies and live into them. The sins of the father and mother are passed down to the son and daughter and abuse and drugs; even theft or prostitution is just the way of the world; they accept the fallen world as normal instead of the Kingdom.

They also put up defenses against any and all judgment that comes to feel like an attack. They grow cold even to gentle and well-meaning suggestions or encouragement. This is where Jesus' parable comes in about putting an unshrunk patch on an old tear and how it just rips a bigger hole. When people judge those trapped in the old self, this rips open further an already deep tear.

So Jesus took a different approach. He shrunk himself and went to the lost and the cold and presented the warmth and grace and love of the Kingdom of Heaven. He acted like they were his brother and friend. That a rabbi would do this was cathartic. It started mending the hole instead of making it bigger. It opened them up rather than closing them down; it presented wondrous possibilities and drove away the worldview of no good options. It triggered awareness of the powerful image of God within them; the light of life shined on the Kingdom of Jesus all around them.

Now the good people around Jesus did not particularly care for his hanging out with sinners; he almost seemed to be having a celebration with them. This got me thinking about how really good people often seem dry spiritually; and often times not due to a lack of effort. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law were devout. Conversely, the seemingly lost and forsaken often seem so conscious of God. Part of it is that they have so little that they depend on God more. But I also think that God's gracious Spirit may present Himself more to those forsaken by the world as well.

This reminded me of the parable of the prodigal son. The younger son received his inheritance before his Father died. And he squandered it all in sinful living. But when he returned home, his Father welcomed him with loving arms and threw a great feast for him. His faithful older brother had never had a great party thrown for him and could not believe what was happening.

Our Father in heaven is waiting for people to come home. But Jesus is already out there hanging with the prodigals. He is throwing a Kingdom party for them while the righteous continue to work hard, day after day; striving to stay true to their

Father in heaven. It does not seem fair that God pays scant attention to those who follow his Law of Love while showering the lost with grace.

But aren't they the ones in need of saving? God says to us the same thing the Father did his elder Son. Everything that I have is already yours! Do you not have enough to eat? A home to live in? Good work to do and access to medical care? Have you not received a good education and a solid spiritual foundation? And most importantly, do I not pour out My love and grace upon you as well?

Good people may feel dry spiritually; they may not have strong religious experience; they may even feel challenged or criticized by the Word of God but they should never think they are neglected by Him. His Kingdom blessings surround and fill their lives!

I think Jesus comes to righteous who want a greater share in His Spirit and says, "If it is a Kingdom party that you are looking for, come join me in the places where I am being wed to the lost! You and I have been married for years or decades already. So come and witness to my love being expressed to those who have not known me. Go to where my daily bread is being broken and juice poured out to the hungry. Go to my homeless in temporary shelters. Join the education of poor children. Do what you can for the mentally ill. Visit prisoners and make my mercy and peace known to them."

Did you know that America imprisons a much higher percentage of its people than any other country in the world? Instead of treating and reforming the sinful, we stick them in jail at unprecedented rates. This is not a simple issue with easy answers but reform is needed; especially with regards to those imprisoned for lengthy periods for non-violent drug offenses.

Thank God there are programs that bring new hope and life to America's prisons. 2<sup>nd</sup> Presbyterian in Elizabeth just called a new associate for prison ministries. He's a former NY Times middle east bureau chief...brilliant guy who has been committed to prison ministries for years. And at Thursday's ministerium meeting, we heard from a woman at the Scotch Plains Baptist Church who is involved in a program that does weekend workshops in prisons called the Alternatives to Violence Project. There will be a 90 minute workshop for those interested on Saturday Feb. 28<sup>th</sup> at that church. Prisoners spoke powerfully of the transformation they experienced over three days and through continued commitment to what they learned about themselves and how to handle triggers differently; and as they were shown that people cared and shared real spiritual fellowship.

The body of Jesus continues to reach out and draw into his Kingdom those who have been excluded from it.

I want to conclude with another child of God who had a passion for the forsaken and oppressed. Kayla Mueller, martyred a week ago or so in Syria, wrote this to her parents:

‘I will always seek God. Some people find God in church. Some people find God in nature. Some people find God in love; I find God in suffering. I’ve known for some time what my life’s work is, using my hands as tools to relieve suffering.’ ‘I find God in the suffering eyes reflected in mine. If this is how You are revealed to me, [God], this is how I will forever seek you.’”

Kayla reminds us not only of the risks of love but also the rewards. She was only 27 but she lived a full life— enjoying the fruits of Christ’s compassion and resurrection power here on earth and now in God’s eternity. May we follow her, Jesus and all the saints to the places where the Spirit is drawing the lost and forsaken into the Kingdom of God.