

Mark 2:23 – 3:6

PAPER LATERNS, IS A DOCUMENTARY FILM ABOUT SHIGEAKI MORI, A SURVIVOR OF THE 1945 BOMBING OF HIROSHIMA. I RECENTLY READ AN ARTICLE ABOUT THE FILM AND MORI. MORI WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD WHEN THE BOMB FELL ON HIS HOME CITY. IN THE FILM, HE DESCRIBES THE MUSHROOM CLOUD, AND A DARKNESS SO TOTAL HE COULD NOT SEE THE FINGERS HE HELD UP TO HIS FACE. HE DESCRIBES RUNNING THROUGH THE RUINED STREETS AFTER THE BLAST, TRIPPING OVER COUNTLESS BODIES THAT LITTERED HIS PATH.

AN AMATEUR HISTORIAN, MORI SPENT HIS EARLY ADULTHOOD DOCUMENTING THE EVENTS OF THAT TERRIBLE DAY. IN THE COURSE OF HIS RESEARCH, HE DISCOVERED THE VIRTUALLY UNKNOWN FACT THAT TWELVE AMERICAN POWs HAD DIED IN THE BLAST ALONGSIDE THE 140,000 JAPANESE---AND THAT'S WHEN HIS INTEREST BECAME HIS OBSESSION. THOUGH HE DIDN'T SPEAK A WORD OF ENGLISH, OR HAVE ANY PERSONAL CONNECTION TO THE UNITED STATES, THOSE 12 AIRMEN BROKE MORI'S HEART. AT A TIME WHEN HE HAD EVERY REASON TO FEAR AND HATE AMERICANS, MORI SAW THE TWELVE YOUNG MEN, NOT AS ENEMIES, BUT AS BOYS ALONE AND FORGOTTEN IN A DOOMED CITY, FELLOW VICTIMS DESERVING OF THE SAME DIGNITY AND COMPASSION.

SO FOR THE NEXT FORTY-TWO YEARS, MR. MORI PAINSTAKINGLY RESEARCHED THOSE TWELVE MEN, LEARNING THEIR STORIES, SEEKING OUT THEIR FINAL RESTING PLACES, TRACKING DOWN THEIR RELATIVES IN THE U.S. TO OFFER SOLACE AND CLOSURE, AND WORKING TO HAVE THEIR NAMES REGISTERED AT THE HIROSHIMA PEACE MUSEUM. THE RESEARCH WAS SLOW, HARD, FRUSTRATING, AND COSTLY. IT INVOLVED COMBING THROUGH THOUSANDS OF WAR-TIME DRAWINGS AND DOCUMENTS, COLD-CALLING PEOPLE IN THE U.S. IN THE HOPES OF FINDING THE RELATIVES OF THE DECEASED, WRESTLING THROUGH THE RED TAPE OF JAPANESE BUREAUCRACY, AND WORKING EXTRA JOBS ON THE SIDE TO FUND A CEREMONIAL PLAQUE TO HONOR THE POWs. ALL THIS, WHILE FACING THE BEWILDERMENT AND CONTEMPT OF HIS FELLOW COUNTRYMEN, WHO COULDN'T UNDERSTAND THE COMPASSION THAT DROVE HIM.

COMPASSION. WHAT MAKES COMPASSION POSSIBLE? WHAT MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE? WHAT TRULY COUNTS AS SACRED? WHEN CALLOUSNESS, APATHY, AND FEAR THREATEN OUR HEARTS, HOW DO WE RETURN TO LOVE?

IN OUR GOSPEL READING, MARK DESCRIBES A TWO-PART CONFRONTATION BETWEEN JESUS AND THE PHARISEES. IN PART ONE, JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES ARE WALKING THROUGH A GRAIN FIELD ON THE SABBATH. WHEN THEY GET HUNGRY, THE DISCIPLES PLUCK A FEW HEADS OF GRAIN TO MUNCH ON, JESUS DOESN'T STOP THEM, AND THE PHARISEES POUNCE, ASKING JESUS WHY HE'S ALLOWING HIS FOLLOWERS TO BREAK THE SABBATH. JESUS

ANSWERS, “THE SABBATH WAS MADE FOR HUMANKIND, AND NOT HUMANKIND FOR THE SABBATH; SO THE SON OF MAN IS LORD EVEN OF THE SABBATH.”

IN PART TWO, JESUS ENTERS THE SYNAGOGUE, AND MEETS A MAN WITH A WITHERED HAND. KNOWING THAT HE’S BEING WATCHED, JESUS ASKS THE PHARISEES WHETHER IT’S LAWFUL TO “DO GOOD OR TO DO HARM ON THE SABBATH, TO SAVE LIFE OR TO KILL.” BUT THE PHARISEES REFUSE TO ANSWER. ANGERED AND GRIEVED BY THEIR HARDNESS OF HEART, JESUS HEALS THE MAN WITH THE WITHERED HAND. THE STORY ENDS, PREDICTABLY, WITH THE PHARISEES LEAVING THE SYNAGOGUE TO PLOT AGAINST JESUS’S LIFE.

ONE COMMENTATOR WROTE OF OUR GOSPEL LESSON: THE PHARISEES IN THIS STORY ARE NOT A STAND-IN FOR JUDASIM. THEY ARE A STAND-IN FOR ALL CONVICTIONS, TRADITIONS, DOCTRINES..NO MATTER HOW CHERISHED OR WELL-INTENTIONED...THAT STAND BETWEEN US AND COMPASSION. IN OTHER WORDS, THE QUESTION THIS STORY ASKS IS NOT, “WHAT WAS WRONG WITH 1ST CENTURY JUDAISM?” BUT RATHER, “WHAT HAVE WE...HERE AND NOW...BECOME SO RIGID ABOUT THAT IT’S STANDING IN THE WAY OF SHOWING COMPASSION? WHO OR WHAT HAVE WE STOPPED SEEING BECAUSE OUR EYES HAVE BEEN BLINDED BY OUR OWN BEST INTENTIONS?

WHAT ARE WE CLINGING TO THAT IS NOT GOD? HENRI NOUWEN WROTE THAT COMPASSION CAN NEVER COEXIST WITH JUDGMENT BECAUSE JUDGMENT CREATES DISTANCE AND DISTINCTION, WHICH PREVENTS US FROM REALLY BEING WITH THE OTHER.

WE DO A HUGE INJUSTICE TO THE PHARISEES IF WE WRITE THEM OFF AS BAD PEOPLE. THEY WERE *GOOD* PEOPLE---GOOD PEOPLE TRYING TO PRESERVE AND PROTECT THOSE THINGS...LAWS, RITUALS, TRADITIONS, HABITS, THAT MEDIATED FAITH FOR THEM. HOW IS THAT ANY DIFFERENT THAN WHAT WE DO WHEN WE HOLD FAST TO OUR WORSHIP PRACTICES, OUR CHERISHED SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES, OR OUR BELOVED DAILY RITUALS? DON’T WE JUST AS READILY DECIDE WHAT IS SACRED IN OUR OWN LIVES, AND THEN REFUSE TO BUDGE EVEN WHEN THOSE THINGS BECOME LIFELESS?

THIS IS AN UNNERVING STORY. IT’S A STORY ABOUT JESUS WALKING THROUGH THE SACRED FIELDS IN OUR LIVES, AND PLUCKING AWAY WHAT WE HOLD DEAR. IT’S A STORY ABOUT JESUS SEEING PEOPLE WE’RE TOO BUSY OR HOLY TO NOTICE, AND HEALING PEOPLE WE’D JUST AS WELL IGNORE.

I IMAGINE THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE IN MR. MORI’S LIFE WHO CONSIDER HIS WORK A WASTE OF TIME AT BEST, AND A DISLOYAL SCANDAL AT WORST. WHY WOULD A MAN GIVE UP FOUR DECADES OF HIS LIFE TO HONOR 12 DEAD AMERICAN BOYS? WHY WOULD A JAPANESE SURVIVOR OF THE A-BOMB CARE ABOUT PROVIDING CLOSURE TO AMERICAN FAMILIES?

WHY WOULD ANYONE BRING THE BUSINESS OF A SYNAGOGUE TO A GRINDING HALT ON A SABBATH MORNING? WHY WOULD A MAN RISK HIS OWN LIFE TO HEAL A STRANGER'S WITHERED HAND?

JESUS TEACHES US THAT NOTHING IS MORE SACRED THAN COMPASSION. THE TRUE SPIRIT OF SABBATH---THE SPIRIT OF GOD—IS LOVE. LOVE THAT FEEDS THE HUNGRY. LOVE THAT HEALS THE SICK. LOVE THAT SEES AND ATTENDS TO THE INVISIBLE.

CHRISTINA FELDMAN WRITES: “WE ARE ALWAYS BEGINNERS IN THE ART OF COMPASSION. NO MATTER HOW ADVANCED OR REFINED WE BELIEVE OUR UNDERSTANDING TO BE, LIFE IS SURE TO PRESENT US WITH SOME NEW EXPERIENCE OR ENCOUNTER WITH PAIN WE FEEL UNPREPARED FOR. OVER AND OVER WE ARE ASKED TO MEET CHANGE, LOSS, INJUSTICE, AND OVER AND OVER AGAIN WE ARE ASKED TO FIND THE STRENGTH TO OPEN OUR HEARTS WHEN WE ARE MORE INCLINED TO SHUT DOWN.”

WE HAVE THE BEST TEACHER IN THE WORLD AND THAT IS JESUS HIMSELF. COMPASSION THRIVED IN THE HEART OF JESUS AND IN HIS TEACHINGS. JESUS WAS A PERSON OF IMMENSE LOVE. WHEN JESUS URGED HIS FOLLOWERS TO BE COMPASSIONATE, HE KNEW WHAT HE WAS ASKING. EVERYWHERE HE WENT HIS AWARENESS OF PEOPLE'S SUFFERING BECAME EVIDENT. HE Poured OUT HIS LOVE AND GAVE GENEROUSLY OF HIS TIME, ENERGY AND CONCERN TO RELIEVE THEIR BODY OF BODY, MIND, AND SPIRIT.

JESUS KNEW BOTH THE RISK AND THE PRICE TO BE PAID FOR BEING COMMITTED TO COMPASSION AS IS EVIDENT IN TODAY'S READING. WE TOO KNOW THE CHALLENGE FOR THE GOSPEL CALL TO BE COMPASSIONATE IS ONE THAT GOES RIGHT AGAINST THE GRAIN, THAT TURNS US COMPLETELY AROUND AND REQUIRES A TOTAL CONVERSION OF HEART AND MIND.

I ONCE READ A STORY ABOUT A SMALL GROUP OF LEADERS WHO WENT SEARCHING FOR THE CAVE OF WISDOM. LEGEND FORETOLD THAT THIS PLACE PROVIDED MARVELOUS KNOWLEDGE AND GUIDANCE FOR THOSE WHO LOCATED IT. THE EXPLORERS SET OUT WITH HOPE OF RETRIEVING THIS PERCEPTION AND DIRECTION IN THEIR LIVES AND FOR THE PEOPLE THEY SERVED. THE JOURNEY TOOK A CONSIDERABLE AMOUNT OF STEADY TRAVELING, GETTING LOST IN THE DARK, ASKING DIRECTIONS, AND PLOTTING THEIR WAY. THE SEEKERS TRAVELED THROUGH ALL SORTS OF WEATHER, STUMBLING AT TIMES ALONG DIFFERENT TERRAIN, BUT DETERMINED TO FIND THIS TREASURED SITE.

FINALLY, THEIR LONG-SOUGHT GOAL CAME INTO VIEW. THEY BREATHED A SIGH OF JOY AS THEY ARRIVED AT THE CAVE OF WISDOM, WHERE THEY FOUND A FRIENDLY GUARD AT THE ENTRANCE. THE GUARD WELCOMED THEM HEARTILY AND INVITED THEM FORWARD. BUT THE LEADERS HESITATED. THEY TURNED TO CONVERSE AMONG THEMSELVES. THEN THEY

REPLIED TO THE GUARD, "THANK YOU, BUT WE'RE MUCH TOO BUSY FOR EXPLORATION. WE JUST WANT TO SAY WE'VE BEEN HERE." HAVING SAID THIS, THEY TURNED AROUND AND HEADED BACK TO WHERE THEY BEGAN.

WE HAVE TRAVELED THE ROAD OF DISCIPLESHIP FOR YEARS HAVEN'T WE? LEARNING MORE ABOUT JESUS AND HIS CALL AND CLAIM ON OUR LIVES. BUT HAVE WE TRULY EXPLORED AND ACTED UPON HIS MANDATES? OR DID OUR EXPLORATION STOP ONCE WE ACCEPTED JESUS AS OUR LORD AND SAVIOR? THE JOURNEY WITH JESUS DOES NOT STOP WHEN WE ANSWER YES TO HIS CALL. THE GUARD AT THE DOOR, JESUS CHRIST, INVITES US TO COME INTO THE CAVE OF LOVE...LIVING OUT COMPASSION. MAY WE ENTER AGAIN AND AGAIN AND FIND THE TREASURES THAT AWAIT US. AMEN.