

February 23, 2020
This is what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like
Matthew 8:1-17

A recent CBC story tells of Eleanor Vannon, a student at Camosun College in Victoria.¹ She experienced anxiety in high school. But she had high expectations of herself, and felt she had to be *"the strongest and the toughest."* At the same time, she was haunted by feelings of low self-worth and questioned if she even deserved a post-secondary education. One day when she had four 2000-3000 word papers due, she froze. *"I was wandering across campus panicking, thinking, 'I don't know that I have enough time to do all of the reading for this work.' And I found a quiet bench, and I sat down and I started hyperventilating and crying."*

According to the 2019 National College Health Assessment, in a survey of over 55,000 post-secondary students in Canada, 21% felt *"so depressed that it was difficult to function,"* and 23% felt *"overwhelming anxiety."* More than 10% had seriously considered suicide within the last 12 months, and 2% per cent had attempted suicide.

One of the people I have had the privilege to meet recently is Dr. Santa Ono, President of my Alma Mater, UBC. Dr. Ono is also a wonderful Christian man. He talks openly how, at age 14, he had two siblings who were prodigies, but he felt profoundly inadequate. Growing up in an Asian immigrant family in a predominantly Caucasian neighbourhood also fed into the sense that he didn't belong. He says, *"I was increasingly feeling hopeless. I was increasingly feeling as if I was inadequate, as if I would never meet the expectations of those around me — that I brought shame to my family."*

He describes an evening in his teens when he went into the medicine cabinet and took a bunch of medication: *"I took as many of those as I could."* He survived that first suicide attempt, but he would later try a second time. He remembers being so depressed that he could barely get out of his dorm room bed and couldn't bathe or eat. *"Not nourishing myself properly, not having the kinds of positive influences on my day, you just spiral into deeper and deeper depression."* He was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a condition that involves swings between episodes of depression and overexcitement.

We live in a world where we're all too busy, there are enormous expectations, we're taught to compete rather than collaborate, and we can feel socially isolated and disconnected. Into this world, comes Jesus ...

The socially isolated (Matthew 8:1-4)

Leprosy is a long-term bacterial infection. It leads to damage of the nerves which, in turn, may result in a lack of ability to feel pain, which, in turn, can lead to the loss of parts of a person's extremities from repeated injuries or infection due to unnoticed wounds. It's contagious, through a cough or contact through nasal fluid from an infected person. This

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-feb-14-2020-1.5462642/you-just-spiral-ubc-president-who-overcame-mental-health-crisis-determined-to-help-canadian-students-1.5462672>

person has a serious physical illness, but at least as important is his social isolation. Lepers were outcasts. They were officially labelled "unclean." They had to stay out of town. Nobody could approach them; nobody would dream of touching them; nobody would speak to them (not even their own family). Yet Jesus *speaks* with him. Jesus *touches* him ...

Nobody had touched him for a LONG time. Can you imagine how the leper must have felt?

Jesus tells the now-former-leper to go through the regular process of showing himself to the priest, making an offering, and all the rigmarole to be restored as a full, clean, member of the people of Israel, welcome in the community, integrated into society. He is part of community again. One of the great gifts we, as a church, can offer the world – authentic community.

We need to know that when we feel disconnected, isolated, and alone, Jesus still cares about us passionately. He always loves us and has time for us. And, as the family of God, we can be aware of the lonely, disconnected people around us, and care for them, in Jesus' name. We are called to be genuine community for people no matter who or what their issue are.

The Kingdom of heaven – Jesus – breaks down walls and barriers. God connects people. Connecting people – belonging – is a key part of the good news of Jesus.

Those "other" people (Matthew 8:5-13)

Roman centurions were foreigners. They looked differently. They talked differently. They lived differently. They had "other gods." Jewish rabbis also taught they were "unclean." You were not to talk with them. You could not go into their homes or eat with them. True, many Roman soldiers were harsh and brutal. Others were good people. The Rabbis didn't discriminate; they despised all foreigners equally and wanted them all sent back to where they came from. If they could have built a wall along the border of Israel, they would have.

When the centurion talks to Jesus, what does Jesus do? A "true" rabbi would refuse to engage with him. A "true" rabbi would certainly not be willing to go to his home and therefore become "unclean." But Jesus is willing to do both of these things.

Jesus also recognizes a faith in this Roman He doesn't find in many of the Jewish leaders. This foreigner recognizes a clear chain-of-command. Just as a Roman centurion has authority because He has been given authority by the Emperor, Jesus has authority to heal because He has been given that authority by God. This non-Jewish person understands Jesus truly represents the presence and power of God Himself. Therefore, the centurion argues, Jesus simply has to say the word and the power of Almighty God will be released.

The Jewish leaders don't get that. They certainly don't accept Jesus is the Messiah, Emmanuel, "God with us." They certainly don't accept Jesus' authority over anything: He's just a troublemaker and a heretic. They're sure they are "saved" because of their ethnic heritage. But Jesus warns them their genetics don't matter. Faith – believing that Jesus is God among us, with all the power and authority that comes from that – is what matters. *"Many will come from the east and the west,"* Jesus says – from ALL sorts of tribes and

nations and people groups – and find salvation. Because of faith.

What is the experience of immigrants or refugees in our country? Are you a recent immigrant: how are you feeling? The good news is GOD loves you and welcomes you here. Hopefully, God's church loves you too. How about those of us who are not so recent immigrants (all of us, if we're not First Nations, are immigrants or descendants of immigrants)? Do we ever convey the message new people are not welcome here? Do we wish they would leave? Do we ever ignore them? As the family of God, we are called to welcome whom God welcomes – ALL people – in the name of Jesus.

The Kingdom of heaven – Jesus – breaks down walls and barriers. God welcomes people. Welcoming people from every nation and people group – even those who are of different ethnicity, culture, or religion – is a key part of the good news of Jesus.

Second-Class Citizens (Matthew 8:14-15)

Lepers were social outcasts. Roman centurions were foreigners. Both groups were people the rabbis taught were "unclean." You should have NOTHING to do with them. You shunned them. But Jesus touched them, spoke with them, loved them, and healed them. Building bridges to lonely, struggling, ignored people is a key part of the good news of Jesus.

The rabbis were also sure that **MEN** – specifically **JEWISH men** – were the really important members of society. Women had no rights. They received no formal education. They were possessions more than people. Certainly, anyone claiming to be the Messiah would know that. Such a person should spend his time with the important MEN of Jewish society. In fairness, the Romans were no better. Women could not be Roman citizens and had few, if any legal rights (let's be honest, some churches today are no better, either).

Why is Jesus spending time with a fisherman's mother-in-law? She's a WOMAN. She's an UNIMPORTANT woman at that – she's the mother-in-law of a poor labourer, not even the wife of a Temple official. Why is Jesus even at Peter's house to begin with?

First, we need to recognize that in Jesus' eyes there are NO unimportant people. Priests and prophets are no more important than carpenters or fishermen (or lepers or Romans).

Second, we need to recognize that God is not sexist. Men are no more important than women. Jesus is just as happy to spend time talking with, healing, teaching, and empowering women as He is men. If we're faithful to WHOLE of Scripture (and not just take a couple of verses out of context), women were hugely influential in the life and ministry of Jesus, and in the growth and ministry of the early church.

If you feel like a second-class citizen in the kingdom of God, know that you are not! **You** are just as much God's beloved child as anyone else. Jesus wants you to know you are His precious, beloved sister/brother. If you know someone who feels like a second-class citizen, affirm them that they are just as beloved as anyone else, in the name of Jesus.

The Kingdom of heaven – Jesus – breaks down walls and barriers. Women and men, young and old, healthy or leper, Roman or Jewish – everyone who puts their faith in Jesus is equal in the God’s Kingdom. Being a first-class citizen is a key part of the good news of Jesus.

Forgotten people (Matthew 8:16-17)

At least as shocking, Jesus spends time with sick and demon-possessed people. These are the forgotten, forgettable people. If they had institutions back then, these would be “those” people with addictions, disabilities, chronic illnesses, dementias ... As it was, they were at best beggars, or, at worst, pushed into the wilderness to die (remember Legion, Mark 5:1-5).

The powers-that-be had no time for these folks. They weren’t important. They didn’t matter. How does Jesus deal with them? Whatever people’ issues are, Jesus meets them where they are. He has time for them. He loves them. He heals them. He gives them new life.

In our world there are all sorts of “forgotten people.” In hospital. In lodges. In assisted living. In their own homes. Folks who can’t get out anymore. People with chronic physical or mental health issues. The good news is Jesus has time for them. Jesus cares for them just as much as He cares for you and me. What about us? Do we notice those “forgotten” people in our world? Some of you are great at that. You visit. You call. You send a card. Some of the rest of us struggle a bit with “out of sight, out of mind.” Who might God be putting on your heart? In your mind?

The Kingdom of heaven – Jesus – breaks down walls and barriers. Being noticed, being remembered, being loved, having hope is a key part of the good news of Jesus.

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We live in a tough, alienating, discouraging world. Dr. Santa Ono says it's hard to compare his experience with what students are experiencing today. On the one hand, they're more free to talk about mental health struggles; on the other hand, they're facing unprecedented challenges. *"The most profound moment for me," he says, "was when the president of the student body in the UBC Okanagan campus asked thousands of entering students whether they were optimistic about the future of the world. Only one hand went up, out of thousands. A lot of university students are worried about the future of the world, about their futures. And that is compounded upon what we worried about when we were in university."*

The Kingdom of heaven – Jesus – breaks down walls and barriers. Being beloved by God, finding community in the church, being welcomed, being loved and having hope – this is the good news of Jesus. This is good news in a world of fear, hopelessness, and despair. This is the good news of the Kingdom of heaven. This is the good news of the church. We believe in and live as a radically different type of community, with a radically hopeful message, and a radically inspiring purpose. Do you need to hear that good news yourself? Do you know someone else who does? How can we be people of good news today? This week?

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