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Meditation on Luke 18:35 – 43

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Dear sisters and brothers,

“Why this text?” “Why did the episode of Jesus walking to Jericho and healing a blind man make it into the gospel of Luke?”

For quite some years already I have been asking these questions while interpreting the message of the biblical passages of the four gospels. The background to this approach is my conviction that there must have been hundreds, if not thousands of episodes, little and big, yet always involving Jesus – words, exchanges, encounters, discussions, symbolic actions – during his life and ministry in God’s mission.

Yet, not many of them made it into the gospels. Some of them began to already fade away during the early process of passing Jesus’ stories from one place to the other, from generation to generation. They weren’t telling enough about Jesus’ message and ministry.

What was retained, however, was the essential. These were the stories and words that were passed on as something the faith community needed to know. They powerfully convey what Jesus had come to bring into the world in God’s name and for God’s sake.

What is it then that the first generations saw in this episode that took place at the entrance of Jericho that was so telling and so revealing? Where did they nod, while listening to this story, asserting collectively: “Yes, that’s Jesus!” and “Yes, this is us and who we ought to be!”

I see several elements in this story that probably spoke so strongly then.



The first one is something we don't grasp anymore today, but which people in the Holy Land immediately grasped with a sense of astonishment. Jesus went to Jericho! Hence, he went to that city which Joshua, while entering into the Promised Land, conquered first, and upon which, after destroying it in its totality, he had pronounced a terrible sentence: "Cursed before the Lord the hands who rebuild this city...."

Yet, it was rebuilt. All of this is narrated in the Old Testament, in a book everybody knew by heart. Joshua's curse is there, as is the story of those rebuilding the city and eventually dying because of it.

What do you do with such a city? What sort of reputation can such a place have? It was not meant to be anymore, a place whose non-existence was intended to convey the triumph and the supremacy of the conquerors. It was indeed there, in the maps and the geography of the Holy Land, yet it was a non-city in the religious, ideological and political mind-map of many.

That's the city Jesus approached. To the astonishment of many, and to the anger of those in power, Jesus went to the no-place, to the no-city, defying reputation, social convention, and probably also political and religious convictions.

"Yes, that's Jesus", nodded those hearing and retelling the story. Because it powerfully conveyed Jesus's message that God didn't want any place and any people to be excluded anymore from the new life God came to offer to all. With his approach to Jericho, without yet saying a single word, Jesus conveyed a purpose to the mission he incarnated: it's a journey meant to touch everybody. A journey that, while knowing about all the physical and mental borders and "no-places" that exist, still sees them all in the light of God's overall purpose of healing and transformation. Seen with the eyes of God, there are no such no-places, there are no such no-cities.

"Yes, that's us and who we ought to be", they nodded, strengthened by this story in their own journeys of proclamation and service, understanding that they had been brought into God's powerful tide towards humankind and creation at large. They could recognize their own faith journeys, often leading them to no-places, dangerous and lonely in human terms, yet at the same time so full of God's presence.

So we shall be affirmed as well, while listening to that ancient narration--allowing our lives and journeys as individuals and as faith communities to be centered in God's mission while journeying into the new places into which God calls the church.

The second aspect that I believe caught the attention of early listeners is related to the blind man. I won't dwell on an aspect that is very important and worth a whole sermon: just imagine what it was to be a blind man in that stigmatized city with its dubious reputation. So precarious was his situation that he couldn't even be in that city, but was pushed outside of it and had to squat at its entrance.

Instead, I want to focus on the cry of the blind man: "Have mercy!" he shouts, grasping the chance of his life to overcome his situation of marginalization and despair. More importantly, I want to focus on the reaction of the crowd, rebuking the blind man. What a

painful situation, and what a low point of human nature: mobbing to deny the blind beggar even the right to ask for mercy...

I believe this aspect of the text connected the early community of faith both with the *memory* about Jesus' suffering and dying on the cross, and their own collective *experience* of opposition and rejection that they were subjected to. They too were rebuked, called to order while proclaiming the stories of compassion and solidarity that had become so central in their lives, but which were so much in opposition to how society was ordered and established.

"Yes, that's Jesus!" they nodded, understanding that God's journey towards humankind took Jesus eventually to the cross, where the substance and the truth of God's compassionate intention were confirmed and sealed.

"Yes, that's us and who we ought to be", they understood, carrying on with their journey of proclamation and diakonia, understanding that at times what they had to witness was so profoundly counter-cultural, so much outside a general consensus, and yet so coherent and needed in view of what faith had taught them, that they just had to carry on with it.

So shall we be affirmed today as communities of faith, dear sisters and brothers, while listening to this ancient narration, also in this part of the world, Europe, and let this story speak to the outcries of today's people.

To me, the outcry for compassion and solidarity comes to us today from those fleeing conflict, poverty and climate change, and seeking refuge to protect their lives. Sadly, it is an outcry that is too often ignored, if not rebuked and silenced.

Referendums are being organized with the question as to whether to protect or not to protect, even though most countries in the world have signed a convention that invokes a duty to protect. The outcome of such referendums shouldn't take anybody by surprise: they push refugees outside the common space of Europe, as the blind man was pushed outside the city of Jericho.

I know how complex it is to respond to the increased numbers of those seeking refuge. The LWF serves 2.5 million refugees to this very day. It is a challenge to protect all of those in need of protection. There are no simple approaches, no magic solutions. This ancient narrative of Jesus approaching Jericho, however, sends the church into a very particular journey that approaches the complexities of this reality with *compassion* as a guiding principle. We shouldn't feel ashamed of the message of compassion, but announce it boldly.

I come with a word of gratitude to the Church of Norway for the meaningful witness you have offered while addressing the needs of those seeking refuge in your country. You didn't join the fearful choruses of rejection and self-protection that are so common today, but sung instead the beautiful tunes that God taught us to sing through Jesus Christ. You welcome the stranger. Thank you. Your witness represents a great encouragement to us all.

The third and last element that I want to highlight from this text today is the interpretation Jesus gives to the outcry of the blind man: surprisingly he calls this outcry 'faith'! "Your faith has saved you", he says to the blind man!

So what is faith then, according to Jesus? In this narration it is actually what centuries later Martin Luther brought to the center of his theological argumentation. Faith is the full awareness of a human being's total dependency upon God's mercy and compassion. As the blind man couldn't bring any argument as to why Jesus should have compassion on him, but just cried out for compassion, we too see our empty hands when seeking God's transforming and healing presence in our lives.

It's a tough message, I know, because we tend to think in much bolder terms about ourselves. It's a hard message, because for good reasons we have learned to give value and dignity, rights and human rights to each and every human being, therefore acknowledging the citizenship of every single human being - within the walls of the city, to use the image of Jericho and the blind man.

I am grateful to be living in times that know about human rights, but I am concerned that they are under so much pressure today, globally. As somebody who grew up in the context of dictatorship I know all too well that the curtailment of human rights leads to nightmares, particularly for the vulnerable and the marginalized. You know this too, from your own history during the time of the Occupation. Because we know all of this, we must remain vigilant so as to not to allow any little door to be reopened, through which old nightmares would reinstall themselves in our world.

In my estimation, it is a general attitude of self-righteousness, a sense of entitlement and of entitled superiority—an attitude which our understanding of faith in the Lutheran tradition challenges--that is at the roots of the pressure under which human rights find themselves today. Self-righteousness leads to stone-heartedness towards the other. A sense of entitlement inevitably leads to painful self-sufficiency. The unawareness of one's own dependency upon compassion and grace makes relationships increasingly graceless. For the one who doesn't realize how much is given to him or her, gratitude, generosity and solidarity become alien words.

In many ways I see this to be the context within which the church is called today to offer its witness. And believe me: I don't think there was ever a better time, therefore, to be the church, announcing boldly and joyfully that core message which we know so well, and around which we gather as Lutheran churches globally: it is by God's grace and compassion that we are set free to love and embrace our own lives, the lives of our neighbors and the entire creation as God's good gift. For God's sake: give yourself a break! Give your neighbor a break! Give the groaning creation a break! Know your own dependency, so that you remain capable of compassion.

It is with this message that we will gather at the Twelfth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in May, conveying the vitality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in today's world. We will meet there in Namibia as the first generations met, affirming each other in our common witness in this world. A world which doesn't need more fragmentation, but rather bridge-building; which doesn't need more polarization, but rather communities

reaching out to find common ground while sharing a common space; a world which doesn't need more corrosive discourse, if not communication breakdowns, but rather communities engaging in dialogue and joint discernment. And that's the mission into which God sends us! We are well placed!

As the first generations did then, we will be reading Scriptures, looking for Christ in all what we read, yet also having Christ speaking to us, because of what we read. As the first generations did then, we will be looking for opportunities to be sent into this world, becoming part of God's mission of justice, peace and reconciliation. And we will enjoy the presence of the other, making some of our journeys less lonely, reassuring each other of God's presence which we apprehend by faith, emboldening us for what we need to announce and how we need to serve.

Sisters and brothers, because of all of that: it's a good time to be the church! Let us just be, what by God's grace we have been called to be.