Invitation to the Table

I hate driving during the commute between here and Little Rock. Bubba in his raised pickup truck, pipes roaring, driving on the edge of road rage... But there is a kind of rhythm to it—hard rock; loud and fast.

But If time allows, I go the back way—up 64 to 107 and across to hwy 5, or over Wye Mountain to hwy 10. There's also a rhythm there—a pastoral symphony—and much less traffic.

But wherever you drive, there are occasional disruptions to the rhythm: accidents or construction lock down traffic; eighteen-wheelers taking miles to pass each other at ten mph under the posted speed limit; even in the country, farmer Jones on his tractor pulling his hay baler to the next pasture.

We get into a rhythm and we don't like disruptions. They throw our whole day for a loop, especially when they're unexpected. But sometimes we actually find ourselves blessed by a change in rhythm—a detour we'd never have chosen on our own. Sometimes that road less traveled is more scenic than the quickest, most efficient route.

The Passover was familiar territory for Jesus' disciples. They'd sung the songs and tasted the bitter herbs every year of their lives. They remembered the stories of the ancestors and the God who liberated them from the oppression of Empire. The rhythm was familiar.

But Jesus disrupted their rhythm. They had trusted in him as a second Moses, one who would lead their people into a new era of abundant life, dignity, and freedom. They didn't anticipate the road down which he would lead them, or the shape God's salvation would take.

So, Jesus gave them a sign, a new covenant, a new route to travel, a new meaning to an ancient meal, so they might understand that God can work to bring new life, even through life's ambushes.

As we share that same sign, may it renew in us a willingness to seek new paths in the face of disruption, new roads when our planned route as emissaries of the gospel is blocked. We can do that because we trust that God will make a way where there is no way.

Our communion hymn is #426, "The Voice of Jesus Calls His People."

Pastoral Prayer

God of Compassion, it is your heart, reflected in each of us, that is broken by the hurts of the world. You created the world in love that somehow endures and finds its way into all the cracks and broken places despite all the ways we humans try to stifle it.

Wherever we turn, we see and hear and feel the aching of the world, the sorrow of all who are hurting, some by chance, some by negligence, and even some by malice. Grant us courage to not turn away. Grant us strength to not seek ways to dull our own senses. Let our hearts break, even as yours does, that we might be moved to act.

Fill us with your spirit of compassion that we might bring healing where there is hurt—for all who lack shelter, food, clothing, and care—for communities that are denied resources they need and deserve, and for those who have been driven to poverty by war and disaster. Help us that in our gratitude for what we have we are moved share our abundance with those who know scarcity.

Fill us with your spirit of compassion for those whose lives are uprooted by violence and instability, hemmed in by hostility. Give us courage to be instruments of your peace, to cultivate hospitality for all our neighbors, both near and far, welcoming them as you have welcomed us.

Fill us with your spirit of compassion for people recovering from disaster, seeking to rebuild lives and homes in the aftermath of devastation caused not only by nature, but by human neglect and abuse of our environment. Help us to imagine systems of protection, care, and resilience that endure long after news cameras leave the ruin and destruction, and make our hands ready to work in whatever ways we can to build, re-build, and restore what is broken.

Fill us with your spirit of compassion, that we might bring healing where there is hurt. Give us a double measure of your unquenchable Spirit, that we might grow from who we think we are to who you know we can be.

Amen.

MARK 2:1-5 (NRSVUE) ***When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door, and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Child, your sins are forgiven."***

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The Word of God for the people of God!

I've been riding the coattails of a theme from the music and worship conference Susan, Jo Lynn and I attended in Columbus, Ohio last October. It fits the season of Epiphany that emerges from the story of the Wise Men" in Matthew 2.

You know the story: Magi were a priestly class of Persian/Babylonian astrologers. They had seen some astral phenomenon that signaled the birth of a new king and had gone to find him. For Matthew the story previews Jesus' rejection by the Temple (Herod) oligarchy and his acceptance by the rest of the world (the Magi).

The birth of a new king creates a conflict with whatever kingship already exists in this world. There's not enough room in Israel for two kings. And from then until today, Jesus represents a conflict with empire.

When Herod heard about it, he told the Magi, "When you find him, come tell me where so I can also go and worship him. You know the story; He had no intention of worshiping this pretender to his throne. He was going to kill him, like he killed his own son, who he perceived as a threat. So the story ends, ***"And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the Magi departed to their own country by another way."***

I'm going to teach you a new song we learned at that conference: "Take Us Home by Another Way," written by Christopher Grundy, who was one of the presenters. Christopher is Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship and Associate Dean of Chapel at Eden Theological Seminary in Saint Louis. He was a powerful speaker, and musical composer.

[Click as instructed] [Video] [When the song is ended]

"And we'll pave the road with justice…" Justice is a "red flag" word in Christian conversations between liberal and conservative, between main line and evangelicals. A significant point to be made is that the Hebrew nouns, justice and righteousness, and the adjective/adverbs just and righteous all come from the same root word and mean essentially the same thing. They appear 951 times in the Hebrew Scriptures; a little over one-third of those appearances in the Hebrew prophets addressing kings and the Temple oligarchy. Those same words appear 411 times in the New Testament, for a total of 1362 times. I understand that in Western jurisprudence the meaning of justice is somewhat different. As Christians, I do not

think we can, with biblical integrity, dismiss the ethical and political validity of the biblical meanings of justice and righteousness. 1362 time.

In a time marked by disruption and an absence of integrity, Week of Compassion is deeply shaped by the ways we interpret those words. Many of our ministry partners are facing reduced resources and increasingly frequent weather-related disasters precisely related to how those words are applied.

Yet, even given those realities, Week of Compassion daily witnesses human resilience, courage, generosity, and hope.

Today's gospel reading offers a profound image of what Christian community looks like in such a world. The gospel writer does not identify those four who carry their friend. What matters is not who they are, but what they do. They see someone in need and refuse to leave him behind. When the usual path to Jesus is blocked, they imagine ANOTHER WAY.

Isn't it interesting that sometimes the people closest to Jesus become barriers for others to approach.

Pheme Perkins notes in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, "Mark uses the immense popularity of Jesus with the crowds…to create an obstacle for the men seeking a miracle. They can't get near Jesus, and their determination to do so exhibits the faith that moves Jesus to heal the man (v.5a)."

Their faith is not silent or spiritualized. It is proactive, persistent, communal, creative, and tangible. Administers of compassion and care and healing frequently encounter blocked doorways: exhausted systems, neighborhood divisions, disaster-stricken communities, immigration barriers, congregations stretched thin, and a political climate in which recovery takes longer than expected or necessary.

In these moments, the call of the gospel remains the same: carry one another toward healing, even when the path is complicated or unclear or blocked.

Week of Compassion doesn't do this work alone. Like the four friends on the roof, their ministry depends on long-term partnerships, collaborative networks, and communities committed to staying present long after the news cameras move on.

This gospel story reminds us that healing rarely happens in isolation. It happens when people come together and refuse to give up. When one person can't take another step, someone else carries the mat. When the doorway is blocked, someone looks toward the roof. When the world says there's no way, faith imagines ANOTHER WAY.

Thank God for the healing, reconciling, recovering ministry of WoC.

Pray with me: "Spirit take us home, take us home by another way." Amen.