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Little Christian Lies: Averting Our Eyes

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Introduction

Throughout the month of August, we have been doing some debunking in our worship. Led by the lectionary text for the week, each preacher has brought a Little Christian Lie to dispel. A truism that may sound like wisdom yet is found wanting when held up next to Scripture.

I won't give it away just, yet, but this week's little Christian lie is so pervasive that 53% of people polled in the US believed it is found in the Bible. It is not.

What we do find in our Scripture reading today is a story that echoes God's care, concern, and attention to those quite literally on the outside the community.

Jesus' posture toward those who have been—intentionally or unintentionally—pushed to the margins reveals the heart of God for us and for others.

Before we turn to Luke, please pray with me.

Prayer for Illumination

God of truth and mercy,
you see what the world overlooks
and call us into your light.
By your Spirit, open our minds to your word,
our hearts to your compassion,
and our lives to your transforming grace.
Through Christ, who sees and heals, we pray. Amen.

Scripture

Luke 13:10-17

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." ¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴ But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day." ¹⁵ But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" ¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.

The God Who Sees

You can imagine this moment—when the preacher exits the service, maybe chats a bit with folks who have questions or comments, and then just exhales. The word has been proclaimed, hopefully full of grace and truth, and the work is momentarily done.

It's time for lunch...and maybe a nap.

But Jesus exits the synagogue, and immediately sees this woman, bent over, unable to straighten her back. Jesus sees her.

This woman was most likely outside the door of the synagogue, outside the congregation that had gathered to worship God and to learn from Scripture. This is because, at the time, and still in some traditions, women were not permitted inside the sanctuary of the synagogue. Further, rabbis, as a rule, did not speak to women.

I would guess, though, that her marginalization went beyond her gender, as people with physical disabilities or differences were expected to be socially invisible.

Rabbis differed in their interpretation of those whose bodies or minds were outside of their definition of normal. Some saw it as God's judgment, whether on the person or on their parents or generations past. Others saw it as impurity—perhaps not the person's fault, but still unwelcomed within the rituals of the community. Others still viewed it as God giving them an opportunity to have compassion—a first century version of an inspirational story of overcoming the odds.

But Jesus doesn't interpret the woman.

He doesn't wonder about her sin or keep his distance from impurity or turn to the crowd to make her an example of perseverance. He just sees her. As God has always seen the ones cast aside and rendered invisible when they don't fit the norms that make others comfortable.

Jesus sees her, as God saw another woman generations before.

Her name was Hagar.

In Genesis 15, God promised Abram descendants, as many as the stars in the sky. God promised that Abram and his wife Sarai would have a child.

One chapter later, no progress had been made.

Now, Sarai had taken an enslaved woman named, Hagar, from Egypt. And she had an idea. If God's promise was not coming about the way God said it would, maybe they needed to take things into their own hands. God helps those who help themselves, right?

If God wasn't going to grant Sarai a child, maybe a child of Abram could be born through Hagar.

Let's be clear—Hagar was trafficked into slavery. She was then sexually assaulted. And she became pregnant with Abram's child.

Hagar fled into the wilderness.

She was alone, afraid, and desperate. And God appeared to her. God promised she would bear a son, Ismael, and have many descendants. That Ismael would be a fighter, one who would not let anyone get the upper hand on him. Before Hagar returned to her heartbreaking circumstances, she spoke back to God.

“You are the God who sees me. I have now seen the One who sees me.”

El Roi.

Hagar is the first person to give a name to God. And a profoundly personal name, at that. The God who sees *me*. Not a slave, not a foreigner, not a vessel for childbirth...The God who sees *me*.

It is not health, wealth, being from the right place or right family, displaying enough faith, or having an inspiring backstory that draws the attention of God.

God draws near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit, says the Psalmist. God hears the cries of the oppressed; God is attentive to the needs of the poor.

Jesus, God in flesh, looked constantly to the end of the table, to the person outside of the house, to the one on the side of the road, and right at the woman bent over invisible outside of the synagogue.

Those for whom others would avert their eyes, Jesus saw them.

Children of Abraham. Children of Hagar. Children of the living God.

And eye to eye, Jesus treated them with dignity, as complicated, saints and sinners, some days inspiring and some days irritable, fully human, people.

Bearers of God's image in their bodies, their minds, their souls, and their circumstances.

The Little Christian Lie: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves

Jesus often healed those he encountered on the margins. But more than that, he healed the blindness of the people around them, who were unable to see beyond their assumptions and biases, unwilling to challenge the norms and structures of their culture to include the ones pushed aside.

Where others averted their eyes, Jesus drew near.

So, we must face the lie that still causes us to sideline so many children of God today, the lie that allows us to avert our eyes instead of truly seeing those on our margins...

The little Christian lie that, *“God helps those who help themselves.”*

I had thought this catchy idiom had begun with Benjamin Franklin. But it seems that is itself a little lie. It may have been printed in his *“Poor Richard’s Almanak,”* but this little lie goes back much further in history.

The original version gives us a tip as to how idolatrous it can be. In ancient Greece it was said that *“the gods help those who help themselves.”*

The gods of Greece extended a hand to those who proved themselves worthy. Those who were strong, daring, conventionally good-looking, upheld the values of their time and place—that’s who the gods helped.

Our gods in modern life are a bit different, less personified, but just as shallow and fickle. The gods of prosperity, success, and wellness—they help those who appear to pull themselves

up by their own bootstraps, who through charm or connections or positivity seem worth the hassle to help. That's not the God of Israel. That's not the God revealed to us in Christ. That's not the God who has empowered liberators who stuttered, patriarchs who limped, sex workers involved in espionage, prophets who struggled with depression, women who asked way too many questions, apostles who were brash and those who lived with "thorns in their side."

Our God came into this world as a baby born into a Jewish minority, within an empire that occupied the land and oppressed people like him. God walked the earth as a toddler fleeing persecution to a foreign land, and as a man without a place to lay his head.

God sees, calls, and empowers those who—intentionally or unintentionally—have been rendered invisible. And God brings healing to the community that is missing out on their presence, their gifts, their personhood that is necessary for the Kingdom of God to flourish.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

From whom do we avert our eyes?

Or who has been moved out of sight, out of mind?

Because often, we don't even need to avert our eyes. Our infrastructure, laws, and social norms limit our visibility such that we just don't see those we don't want to see.

Infamously, Robert Moses, the powerful urban planner of New York City in the 40's and 50's, designed a beautiful parkway on Long Island that fast-tracked urbanites from their dense neighborhoods to the beach. The Southern State

Parkway was built for cars—a luxury item beyond the grasp of many working-class people. Moses made sure that buses could not drive along his parkway by building a series of low stone bridges over it. The clearance was too low for the city buses that those with less resources, and often darker skin, relied on.

The beachgoers did not need to avert their eyes from those who were in a different socio-economic class or of a different race or nationality. They were rendered invisible by the inhospitable design.

There continues to be built-in ways that governments and corporations make their spaces inaccessible to those viewed as undesirable. It's been given the name, "Hostile Architecture." Spikes on benches, or a removal of benches all together. Retaining walls that slant at an angle impossible to comfortably sit on.

Even more blunt, have been the efforts to relocate people experiencing homelessness from certain neighborhoods or cities all together. This, while creating more hoops and offering less resources for those who need to obtain safe shelter.

Of course, there is a need for public space to be safe for everyone.

But I will address the log in my own eye, I too often equate my safety with feeling comfortable—which has a lot to do with my biases, assumptions, and my tendency, however unintentional, to avert my eyes from those whose circumstances are different than mine.

Folks who are homeless are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators.

Affordable housing, livable wages, the complex web of childhood trauma, domestic violence, mental illness, and substance abuse that can contribute to or be the downstream results of housing insecurity, are complex issues.

Yet, what is not complicated is the humanity, the image-bearing of God, in each person—whether in a car or on a bus, whether resting on a bench or heading to a meeting, and whether in a wheelchair or in need of an IEP or adjusting to new medication or whatever might place us outside of “normal.”

Each person a child of God, whom God does not push out of sight and out of mind.

Each person a child of God, who does not need prove they are worthy of God’s help.

God Helps Those Who...

Friends, the little Christian lie that “God helps those who help themselves” enables us to avert our eyes when we see someone who has not been blessed by the false gods of health, wealth, and success.

The little Christian lie that “God helps those who help themselves” makes us question our own worth and belovedness when we are unable to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, when we find ourselves outside of the narrow and ever-changing category of “normal.”

But that’s not who Christ is—in the world or in us.

God helps those, who others just don't see.

God helps those, who the world does not value.

God helps those, who look like they have it all together, but are falling apart.

God helps those, who need it.

Whether that is you today, or may be you one day, whether that is someone you love, or someone from whom you have averted your eyes, Christ sees; Christ acts.

May we follow him and do likewise. Amen.



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