

**Sermon: A Man Beside Himself**

**Scripture: Mark 3**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

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There is a Nigerian born author and educator named Bayo Accomolafe who often refers to his autistic son in his reflections as he wades into deep territories of psychology, theology, ecology, and ethics and speaks in a way that tend to break open how we normally construct our understanding of the world. In a brief but beautiful article entitled “Oughtism”, he shares the story of his bringing home from one of his trips a wooden jigsaw puzzle for his son Kyah with colorful tetris-shaped pieces. He writes “my 6-year old autistic prophet-at-the-crossroads son grabbed the thing, unwrapped its plastic wrapping in one fell swoop, and got down to putting the pieces back together.” He says he wasn’t too invested in what Kyah did with the puzzle, just wanted him to enjoy himself, until his son returned with a strange request, then Bayo realized he was more invested than he thought. His son held one lonely blue L-Shaped piece of the puzzle and with his eyes intense and focused he held it out to his dad and said - “can you get rid of this for me?”

Bayo explained that *that* wasn’t the way puzzles worked, but Kyah was insistent and so his father Bayo took the piece and slid it into his coat pocket, keeping it available for when he came back looking for it. Bayo writes a little while later “Kyah returned with more roadkill. ‘Can you also throw these ones away, please Dada?’ In his little hand, he held three of those poor worker pieces, now captive to his whims. He was like a drunk surgeon at an operating table tossing away vital organs that he didn't like.” Even though he realized his arguments weren’t working Bayo continued to try and reason with Kyah that

he'd never be able to complete the puzzle without these pieces. Still Kyah was insistent.

So Bayo walked over to the table where his son was working and he writes "then I saw it." From here I'll quote the article in full:

"Kyah had been arranging the pieces according to their commonalities, their shared features, not according to how they had been pre-cut to "complete" the game. He had convened blue rows of 'L'-shaped pieces, black rows of 'I'-shaped pieces, and orange rows of 'J'-shaped pieces. The flat board was now a village of little, spritely shapes in conversation with their kin, stacked upon other princely rows of pieces. Between their parliamentary conversations, awkward and unanticipated gaps emerged - within which nothing could fit. I finally understood why he wanted me to throw away the other wooden pieces: Kyah didn't care about the 'big picture', and couldn't care any less about finishing the puzzle. For me, there was only one way to finish it, only one way the makers of the puzzle expected users ought to play with the pieces; but Kyah - he had found several ways to play that had no neurotypical finish lines."

In the smiling minutes that followed, I realized that while Kyah 'had' autism, I 'had' oughtism. Oughtism is my name for the ways we are trained, habituated, conditioned, and rewarded to think along dominant lines of production. How we 'ought' to behave. A tendency towards the already known. A regulatory refrain that whispers how bodies ought to look like, ought to behave like. Oughtism is... the sweeping regime of the obvious, a vocation of lines and their secretions, a rush to solutions.

But the obvious can render the world invisible. Kyah's blindness to the obvious is how he strays away from being fully disclosed, being found. Kyah teaches me to look again. Not just at myself but at the world that has never been fully made or rendered. And what's prophecy if not the invitation to look again?<sup>1</sup>

And what is prophecy but the invitation to look again? Jesus was a prophet, among other things, he emerged not shot down from heaven but out of a Jewish blood lineage through his mother Mary and a theological

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/oughtism>

lineage of prophets before him who invited the Hebrew people to look again. The problem with those ancient prophets and with Jesus and all the prophets who followed was that the “invitation to look again” does not sit well with the majority of us who have already decided what we are seeing is right and true and we don’t think there’s a need to look again.

We have our ordered world views and that involves the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the organized and the disorganized, and everywhere in between, but for the most part they are configurations of the world that are ordered along typical lines that we are, as Bayo says, “trained, habituated, conditioned, and rewarded to think along”. And what someone with autism like Kyah sees and hears and enacts and what someone like Jesus who is particularly infused with the Spirit of love and the Spirit of wisdom and the Spirit of Heaven sees and hears and enacts is outside of those lines of how we’ve been habituated and how things have been ordered for us and so Kyah and Jesus’ perspectives are considered by the people around them as “disordered”.

But a really good question as we look around this world right now is this - is it ordered as it should be? Is it ok, the way this world is ordered? Or do we need some disordering in order to re-order towards something more whole and more loving?

Prophets are those willing to speak a disorder into the order that needs to be re-ordered. Listen to them if you can take it. And try not to kill or eliminate such voices in some other way. They and their voices are at all levels of our lives. In the family. Is there a disordered voice in your family who makes the rest of you feel terribly uncomfortable? Are they mentally ill? Are they neuro-divergent? Are they coming from a totally

different place from everyone else? You might want to listen more carefully to them than your tempted because such voices of disordering can be how God moves and speaks.

Is there someone at work who is troubling in this way? Do you want to dismiss or exclude and eliminate them? There's your invitation to look again at them, listen more closely to them. Is there some gift in the disorder they represent, some challenge to the order that actually is necessary? Same with your town? Your country? The Globe? Don't assume you'd know the prophetic voices and be able to distinguish them from the problematic demonic ones because that's always the claim... that the prophetic voices are the disordered demonic ones cursing with disruption and turmoil.

It's what the scripture lesson is all about this morning. It's this very dynamic writ clear and sparking with power, right there in our ancient text. Be careful here. Jesus is the one accused of creating disorder and being disruptive and even that's not enough, he's accused of being demonic. That's how the keepers of the status quo, the religious and civic authorities, his very family, see him. We know better, but only because we know the whole story. We know he is full of love, full of God, but what many of the others see in him is someone who has potentially lost his mind. He is "beside himself" is the translation of the greek word, "existemi". Out of his mind. Not in his right mind. Insane. Neuro-divergent from everyone else there. He is beside himself. His mother and brothers come to get him to take him away cause he thinks he's the Messiah. The Pharisees are there to challenge him because he thinks he's the one to forgive sins. The only ones - it seems - able to hear him and accept him in

light of the disordered reality that he's bringing are those who are on the underside, who are being crushed by the "ordered" reality as it stands now. He's a man beside himself, they say, possessed by the devil, they claim and begin to make plans to remove him.

And this is irony. And this is the heart of it. The true demonic is the human impulse to divide and to expel, to accuse and then to cast out. You are the problem, be gone with you! The greek word for accuser is diabolos where we get the word diabolical and devil. The devil is the accuser and is in the hearts of those who divide and expel, who accuse and cast out. The Good News, you see, the Gospel cause Gospel is that God's love is unconquerable. The Bad News of the Gospel, the other side of the Good News, is how resistant the human being is to God's unconquerable love, revealed by the expelling and killing of Jesus. And this happens to all the prophets. And maybe today we kill prophets in other ways. Maybe we medicate them? Maybe we expel them through the mob violence on social media that shames them? Maybe we cancel them without a fair trial? Maybe we deport them back to the dangerous country from where they come?

Who are my brothers and my sisters, Jesus asks. Who are my fellow citizens? Who are those who belong to the Kingdom of God? Those who do the will of my Father in heaven. It's that simple. Not those who have the right bloodline. Not those who are following the religious codes or civic laws necessarily. Not those who have citizenship papers. Not those born into this place or with the right perspective. Not those who have the right belief, who are the born again ones. IT's not they who

belong to the Kingdom of God as much as they want to believe they do but rather it is:

Those who do the will of my father in heaven.

Those who don't divide and expel.

Those who do no violence against others.

Those who notice the mental disorder or our ordered world and don't write off those who don't get along or play along or see along with the order of things that we are habituated to.

Those who look again and again and see the truth of what needs to be seen.

Those who are beside themselves and alongside Jesus for the sake of a world in need of being saved, restored and healed.

As we move into our summer let's keep our eyes open for those among us who are disordered to the order of this world and consider what God might be saying through them to re-order our world towards God's purposes and designs. Amen.