Intimacy in the Dark Night: meditation on Mk 8

> *I desire for you to open fully the door of your heart to Me, your beloved Bridegroom… I knock continuously on the door of your heart, your inner chamber, but many times you do not hear My Knock, for you are distracted with many things, and My presence leaves you.* (9/12/26)

When I pray about this door to the inner chamber of my heart, my imagination quickly goes to a movie that impacted me as a kid. When I was in high school, the classic movie Gladiator came out, with Russell Crowe. A motif runs throughout the film: Maximus walks through a wheat field and reaches a stone wall with a heavy wooden gate. He longs; his heart throbs to cross that gate to his home, but there are unfinished labors and trials he must undertake before crossing. The film builds dramatic suspense as his hand reaches for the latch. Early in the film, Marcus Aurelius asks Maximus, "Tell me about your home." Maximus lights up and grows emotional, describing the gardens of his home in great detail: "The soil is rich black, like my wife's hair." At the end of the film, the sacrificial victim crosses the threshold of that gate and beholds his beloved bride in their splendid garden.

Divine intimacy, like that of perfect spouses, is what our hearts were made for and long for. How can we understand the veil, barrier, door between God and us? I'd like to propose suffering as a type of 'Dark Night', although not caused or directly willed by Him, as that door. God knocks on the suffering of your heart. That tapping hurts, and we cannot understand the wisdom of the why He does.

I want to propose to you a meditation from the gospel that I find allegorical to the truths of our first teaching, "Intimacy in the Dark Night." From the gospel of Mark 8:22-25

> And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man, and begged him to touch him. [23] And he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the village; and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands upon him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" [24] And he looked up and said, "I see men; but they look like trees, walking." [25] Then again he laid his hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and saw everything clearly.

"He spit on his eyes." Take this line at its face value and enter the scene. It's gross, shocking. How exactly did He do this? Think about it. It made me laugh thinking about what reaction I'd get if I spit on Ernie or Mark; I'd get punched. Nothing Jesus did is gross. It can't be a: HaawwkkrrrTuah! (Sound effect) Other gospel versions: He spits in the soil and makes a paste, but not in this account.

Typically, being spit on is insulting; it violates one's dignity. We all get a visceral repulsion. "I did not hide my face from spitting." (Is 50:6) Jesus is spit in the face by priests and guards in the Sanhedrin mock trial. After crowning Him with thorns, Roman soldiers spit in His

face. Why is being spit on an act so accosting? It's as if it violates healthy boundaries of relationship and intimacy.

When are we ever comfortable with another's body fluids? I have always marveled at moms' instinctual reactions to jump into the fray of their kids' body fluids: pee, poop, throw-ups, nasty snot, wet burps, etc. Heck, moms aren't afraid to clean up after accidents of their adult kids or husbands. What makes them so comfortable touching their fluids is the bond of the relationship? "…Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh (Gn 2:23).

When are we ever comfortable with another person's saliva? Administering life-saving CPR makes us overcome any discomfort of contact with another's saliva. Yet the only normal, habitual circumstance I can think of in which humans are comfortable contacting another person's saliva is the type of kiss reserved for spousal intimacy. The mechanics of mixing saliva between husbands and wives is an intuitive language of the body that shouts a clear yet profound reality that mere words struggle to explain. "Open to me. Into me see. As Gift, come into me. I receive the deepest you."

Look at this scene now again… In the town of Bethsaida, people bring this blind man to Jesus, hoping He'd touch him. Jesus takes the blind man by the hand, leads him out of town to be alone, then spits on his eyes. Away from others' gaze, this is a private, intimate exchange. Remember, this guy is blind, so his other senses are highly sharpened. The way Christ holds his hand, the tone of His few words (if any). Imagine the silence of this walk out of town… 'Where are we going? I was hoping he'd do his ritual to heal me… Did I do something wrong?' The unknown feels overwhelming, yet the aching desire in his heart and his sense of poverty render him docile. Fear is definitely felt, and yet he also senses "fear not." He can hear the calmness of Jesus' breathing. When Jesus spits, he feels the warmth of Jesus' breath; he has to smell Jesus' breath. He had to smell Christ's saliva. Had to (nose close enough to eyes); All this had to be really close quarters. Jesus didn't land a lucky shot from yards away. Healing and salvation come to this blind man through unpredictable, intimate contact with Christ's saliva in his eyes.

This blind man has been in physical darkness forever, and this invitation to leave town by the hand of the unknown is highly uncomfortable, especially the saliva part… see the allegory of the Dark Night. In genuine Dark Nights, God is the sole protagonist; He senses in a soul a docility to let Him strip away ego satisfactions, comforts, and attachments to increase its capacity for intimacy with the Trinity. In the first talk, the image is of the bride getting out of her comfy bed. With this saliva/blind man story, I want to stress the discomfort of "not seeing." A dark night isn't a chapter where God's grace is less present. Rather, God floods the soul with a grace that's highly discomforting because it's not understood. Dark nights are journeys into Passovers. A desert-crossing of sorts that goes against our sensibilities and normal understanding. Like seeking healing and being told to bathe seven times in the dirty Jordan.

See in the blind man the gesture of the bride in Beth West's painting. There is utter vulnerability (I trust you, which is always scary) to receive a gift of intimate love balm (spit) so desperately felt and needed. Something marital from deep within Jesus comes into him

(sight/understanding of heart). More on this later. The burning ache for real communion of hearts, only foreshadowed in the marital bond, is satisfied for those who venture into the dark nights. Crossing Dark nights shatters the Hallmark frames/prisons we have of the cold pat on the head (intellect): 'Jesus loves you.'

Turn to the bodily reality of the Eucharist. Allow yourself to be scandalized for a second like those in Jn. 6. Your maker, creator, savior, companion of soul, bodily comes into you, with no less desire and intent than the marital act. It's the ultimate "Into me see, open to me, receive my innermost parts, come into Me." All of us receive communion on the tongue. I have repeatedly witnessed with my own eyes the devotion with which you receive Him on your tongues. You are literally French kissing your maker, creator, savior, companion, and spouse of soul. You literally mix your saliva with His Body and Blood, a commingling of bodily fluids. Recall the quote from Dr. Nina in Lourdes' first talk:

> The Eucharist is the sacrament in which this wedding is consummated, as the bridegroom gives himself unreservedly to us, like a bridegroom to his bride in the sacrament of marriage.[1]

His literal cardiac tissues/fluid come into you; you bite into His Heart. Is your bite marital, or is it stabbing usury? Does He have the permission and freedom to bite into yours, which will feel like a Dark Night, but leads to deeper intimacy?

Going back to the episode of the spitting on the blind man, the blind man isn't healed fully on the first attempt. He sees men like trees, and so Christ touches his eyes again. God is not a vending machine where we get the healing we need and then go on our own way. Is not the temptation to be like gods so deeply rooted in us? The wisdom that the blind man gets after the second round is like the little soul who is utterly dependent on God's need to spit on him every day of his life. Again and again, we must be convicted to turn to Him, to receive Him at daily Mass, and thus confidently persevere in the long pilgrimage of this life towards greater intimacy with God Trinity.

In this meditation we've looked at the blind man, but now I'd like to turn your gaze to Christ. What is going on with Jesus in this scene? I feel Mark inserts this brief healing encounter as a climactic inflection in the whole of chapter 8. The chapter begins with the miraculous feeding of the four thousand, where He expresses great concern that they might faint from hunger if He sends them away. When is the last time you witnessed someone faint of hunger? I never have. The hunger for more than what this life has to offer, thirst for the things of God, is what led these people to physical hunger. The empathy of Jesus-Christ had no limits. He had to feel their thirst deeply and made it His own. I think a distinguishing element of the dark night is the experience of love as the aching thirst for more. "Faint with love" is experienced as "faint with thirst." So, this crowd's thirst plunges Him into a Dark night of sorts.

Right away, Pharisees come to argue with Him and demand another sign from Heaven. "And he sighed deeply in his spirit" (Mk 8:12). Other translations use groan. To sigh means a

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[1] Nina Heereman, *Athirst for the Spirit,* 93

person experiences such intense weariness or relief that the body lets out a deep breath that is audible and often involuntary. Christ saw clearly from where the contempt and testing of the Pharisees came. Their darkness, juxtaposed with the crowds' thirst, must have cast his humanity into deep desolation. He denies them any sign and leaves with the apostles in the boat.

Next, He cautions the apostles in the boat, “Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” (Mk 8:15) This goes completely over their heads, and they worry that they have no bread. “Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember?” (Mk 8:17-18) The human experience of being alone, not seen, not understood by all around you is the worst… The Son of man agonizes in his humanity with the groans of all creations awaiting restoration. The Son of man groans with all human blindness, suffering, brokenness, hardness, and slavery to sin. This level of groaning in His humanity had to be a Dark night.

Now comes our episode with the blind man. I’d like to bring you back to that scene of the spitting. As Christ pours his marital spit upon the eyes of this blind man, I’d like to imagine a deep sigh again… All that pent-up pain and agony from the days before is released in an act of pure love… “en el amor y el dolor me multiplico.” (In love and in sorrow I multiply myself; famous lyrics from María that I often turn to.) In this one blind man, He releases crucified love unto the blindness of the crowds, Pharisees, and apostles. This time it’s a sigh of relief, similar to spouses in their marital union. The Son of God sighs in a life-giving act of spitting. He anticipates fully sharing the bliss He relishes in with the Spirit, in the Father.

What real healing does this episode foreshadow? The rest of chapter 8 tells us. After healing the blind man, Jesus, alone again with the apostles, asks, “But who do you say that I am?” (Mk 8.29) and He tells them “… the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” (Mk 8.31). The blindness He wants to heal us of is not seeing/understanding the deepest recesses of His heart, His desolations that reveal personally and experientially His identity as Suffering Lover and giver of Divine Intimacy.

Every single one of us carries profound sufferings. No doubt there’s darkness in seeing and understanding in them an entrance to intimacy with the Victim. Look again at the Beth West painting and see yourself at the door of suffering. May we, as docile victim souls, have the healed vision to trust His pierced hand knocking on our pain. May we be the few open enough for Him to spit on our pain.

Rev. 3:20: *Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. “*Lord, knock on my pain; I want to know You, I want to see You, I want to love You, and Love With You. Amen.”

With lots of insights here, if I could propose some homework for this week, it would be to go to a silent place and ask Him to help you see with your heart where you fail terribly at hearing His knocking, His spitting on your pain. We are all too human, and we miss countless opportunities when the cross strikes and the spit hits us in the face…. We recoil. Repent with all your core, for being a lousy victim soul. To feel repentance, you will need to get specific. I know my own tactic of soothing pain that surfaces… I turn to my phone for the next podcast, YouTube video, etc.