

Sermon
5 Pentecost—8-B
St. Andrew's, Methuen
June 27, 2021
William Bradbury

Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15; 2:23-24
Lamentations 3:21-33
or Psalm 30
2 Corinthians 8:7-15
Mark 5:21-43

I don't remember all that much from high school, but one night in 9th grade still stands out: I attended our school's production of "The Miracle Worker", the play about the young, blind and deaf, Helen Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan. The breakthrough scene is when Anne Sullivan is spelling with her fingers the word "water" on Helen's palm, while Helen's other hand is under a stream of water and Helen makes the connection between the two. She then exhausts Anne demanding to know the word for everything.

That's the dramatic breakthrough, but what I remember is at the beginning when her mother goes to check on Helen in her crib and discovers her 19-month-old daughter after contracting a virus is now blind and deaf, and **her mother as the lights go out lets out a soul-piercing scream.** I remember the scream.

Most of us know that scream: Certainly, a sick and dying child will make us scream, as will personal failure.

Do you remember a time that you heard that scream in your soul?

Mark presents us with two screams: Jairus, the synagogue leader, is screaming because his beloved 12-year-old daughter is dying. He falls at Jesus' feet and begs him to come lay his hands on her to make her well.

But on his way, there is a woman who is also screaming. She's been fighting a hemorrhage for 12 years—a debilitating condition that also makes her ritually unclean and therefore puts her the outside of any normal social life.

She believes her last best hope is Jesus of Nazareth.

These two healing stories are connected in a number of other ways, usually by contrast.

1. The girl is born the same year the woman contracts her illness—12 years ago. The number 12 in the Bible often represents Israel: as in 12 tribes, 12 apostles.

2. The girl is in a room of her own, maybe a sign of wealth, while the woman has spent all her money on doctors and treatments.

3. The girl's father approaches Jesus from the front and asks for help. The woman approaches Jesus from the rear and, without speaking, touches him.

4. Once the girl is dead, she too, like the bleeding woman, is ritually unclean, thereby making Jesus unclean in touching her.

5. Both girl and woman are healed and both are rightly called daughters, for Jesus calls her "daughter".

In such desperate situations it is easy to become hopeless and just give up: Let the child die and the woman is continue to suffer in body and soul.

Many of us are heirs to the Puritan belief that **spiritual healing** ended with the apostles. As I told awhile back, Agnes Sanford's parents, missionaries in China, did not pray for their dying infant daughter to be made well by God. If the doctors couldn't do it, then the child's death must be God's will.

I've had church people tell me the same thing. Or something truly misguided like, "God must have needed her more in heaven than down here".

The Helen Keller story and the healings in today's gospel are rightly called miracles. But not "miracle" as the Enlightenment understands the term. From this 18th century perspective, which is still very much alive today, a miracle by definition can never happen, because it would require a god, from outside the universe, to violate the laws of nature and interfere with the fixed and orderly running of the world.

As Pastor and author Paul R. Smith puts it: "Christianity, which began in an outburst of life-changing spiritual experiences, is now the primary opponent of such experiences." Integral Christianity: The Spirit's Call to Evolve, page 151

But here's the thing: if the numerous healings Jesus performs in the gospels tell us anything, they tell us that Jesus is always the enemy of sickness and the agent of healing and wholeness.

This means, therefore, as preeminent 20th century theologian Karl Barth wrote on this passage: "**God does not will** that which troubles and torments and disturbs and destroys human beings. He does not will [our] entanglement and humiliation and distress and shame.... He does not will our destruction but our salvation." Church Dogmatics, IV.2. 225

This is the same witness we get from the Book of Wisdom in this morning's first reading:

"God did not make death,
And he does not delight in the death of the living.
For he created all things so that they might exist;
the generative forces of the world are wholesome,
and there is no destructive poison in them....,
God created us for incorruption,
and made us in the image of his own eternity,

This is the mindset Jesus transmits to the twelve: "Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, ² and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal." Luke 9:1

It's never too late to take another step into the Mind of Christ by practicing daily trusting the Spirit to heal. To trust like the bleeding woman who has faith enough to draw into Christ's presence.

Her faith takes her out of her **ordinary self** into a higher state of consciousness where she is willing to appear foolish in order to experience with **Christ her oneness with the Father.**

Anne Sullivan, a daughter of Massachusetts, is rightly called a miracle worker. She had limited vision herself and attended the Perkins School for the Blind. In her Valedictorian address in 1886, she told her fellow students that "**duty bids us go forth into active life. Let us go cheerfully, hopefully, and earnestly, and set ourselves to find our especial part. When we have found it, willingly and faithfully perform it; for every obstacle we overcome, every success we achieve tends to bring man closer to God.**"

When she first arrives at the Keller home after graduation, she has to endure Helen's screams, her hourly tantrums, and physical acting out, even losing a tooth to Helen's anger and violence. Jesus never said following him would be easy.

The question for us is this: are we willing to be such conduits of the healing of God--How open are we to step outside our ordinary

mind, our materialistic rationalism, and be instruments of the good news of the healing of Christ to those who are screaming.

For this is the purpose of our lives.

Helen Keller put it this way: "I know that life is given us, so that we may grow in love. And I believe that God is in me as the sun is in the color and fragrance of the flower, the Light in my darkness, the Voice in my silence."

Therefore, she could also say, "I thank God for my handicaps for, through them, I have found myself, my work, and my God."

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