

Homily – I Want a Miracle

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Today we celebrate Labor Day. Once again this year we celebrate the essential workers who kept us all going during these uncertain times. Before the vaccines were available these folks put themselves into harm's way, and even though the vaccines have reduced the risk of infection by seven times we are learning that there is still some risk of minor cases. So, thank you to our grocery store workers, our teachers, our healthcare workers and all those keep us going. We are very blessed.

Sometimes it is hard to see our many blessings. It is heartbreaking to watch the images coming out of Afghanistan and Haiti. Our ICUs are filling up with Covid patients and healthcare workers are exhausted. Here in California we have smoke from the wildfires and drought seems to be upon us, again. And what is with all the deaths from Hurricane Ida. With everything going on in the world, sometimes it can be hard to see our blessings, and it can be hard to hear about miracles, but that is what we have in today's Gospel reading.

As we just heard, first Jesus heals the daughter of the Syrophenician woman. This is another classic story of Jesus caring for the outsider and those whom Jewish society shunned. Then, we have healing or opening of the ears and mouth of a deaf, mute man. These miracles are wonderful. We join today in giving thanks for these miracles and the miracles that continue to occur for us today. But, it can be hard to trust in miracles when so much seems to be out of control.

Three weeks ago, when I returned from my thirteen week sabbatical, I noticed that a lot of the names on our Prayers of the People list are still the same as they were before my departure. By my count after many months, eleven people on our prayer list are still waiting for a miracle. Jesus teaches us to be persistent in prayer, and that is why we have been reciting the names of eleven people for months. So, maybe we need to be praying for patience and fortitude along with the miracle of healing.

This past week in a session with my Spiritual Director, I was reminded that sometimes we have healing but it is not what we expected. Sometimes we have healing of the heart and soul instead of the body. And, while I have to sigh at the switch, I also have to acknowledge that healing of the heart and soul is very important. Though if I am being honest I still want both. But we need to trust or have faith in God's divine economy. God is good and wants the ultimate good for each of us.

Speaking of ultimate good, have you ever noticed that some people who have hit bottom come out the other side and are renewed? They are living into the beauty that God has created. Last Spring I preached a lot about the cycle of order, disorder, and reorder. As followers of Jesus we know this as life, death, and resurrection. With illness, disaster, and suffering can come rebirth. I have seen resiliency and rebirth in many of those for whom we are persistent in prayer. Again, wholeness may be occurring in the soul even if it is not in the body, though I still want both.

And, while I am asking for things, I want wholeness of the heart for us as individuals, and I also want it for us as a community. Wholeness includes restoring the lonely, the isolated, and the ostracized. Human flourishing comes in many shapes and sizes, and this wholeness is the point of Jesus' ministry here on earth. As Steve said in his sermon last week, we have a God of healing and not a God who punishes. I wonder how God is working in our world to bring healing to our communities so that we can walk with one another, even when we disagree. Actually, I know how God is working. God is working through us. When we are the hands, and feet, and voice of Jesus we see Christ in all, not just those who are already like us. Here is a timely example of loving all. It is one thing to heal and protect our bodies from the ravages of the Coronavirus. Yes, wear masks. Yes, get vaccinated. Yes, isolate and get tested if you might have been exposed or have symptoms. Do all of these things so that we can heal and get to the other side of this pandemic. But also, see Christ in those with whom you disagree. Don't see evil where there is no evil. We are the ones who will bring wholeness to our society by loving all. We can do this for we know that the Holy Spirit sustains us in this type of sacred work.

Now to equip you to bring wholeness, I want to give you another spiritual practice that has proven to be successful throughout the centuries. All of the saint have eventually realized the importance of this practice, and it is one that Jesus models for us. This is a practice that will see us through the long wait for healing. It is a practice that will lead to healing of the heart and soul. It is a practice that will lead to wholeness in our communities. It is a practice that leads us toward God.

No one escapes suffering in this life. None of us is exempt from loss, pain, illness, and death. How is it that most of us spend our lives hiding from pain, avoiding situations that are painful, or pretend that pain doesn't exist, until it is so overwhelming that it leads us away from God and others. In his book "Unattended Sorrow – Recovering from Loss and Reviving the Heart," Steven Levine writes "If sequestered pain made a sound the atmosphere would be humming all the time." Can you hear the hum of all of the pain that we have shut away and pretend isn't there? It is the accumulated losses of a lifetime that slowly weigh us down—the times of rejection, the moments of isolation when we felt cut off from the sustaining touch of comfort and love. It is an ache that resides in the heart, the faint echo calling us back to the times of loss.

We are called back, not so much to make things right, but to acknowledge what happened to us. Grief asks that we honor the loss and, in doing so, deepen our capacity for compassion. However, when this grief remains unexpressed, it hardens and becomes as solid as a stone. In turn, we become rigid and stop moving in rhythm with the soul. And, as we begin to pay attention, we notice that grief is never far from our awareness. We become aware of the many ways it arrives in our daily lives. It is the blue mood that greets us upon awakening. It is the melancholy that shades the day in muted tones. It is the recognition of time's passing, the slow emptying of our days. It is the searing pain that erupts when someone close to us dies—a parent, a partner, a child, a beloved pet. It is the confounding grief when our life circumstances are shattered by the unexpected. Maybe, the phone rings with news of a biopsy, or we find ourselves suddenly without work, or our partner decides one day that the marriage is over. Grief enfolds our lives, drops us close to the earth, reminding us of our inevitable return to the dark soil. Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. When we embrace suffering and death we start to live.

As Jesus and every saint have experienced, it is essential for us to welcome our grief and pain in whatever form it takes. When we do this practice of embracing sadness, we open ourselves to our shared experiences in life. Grief is our common bond. Opening to our sorrow connects us with everyone, everywhere. And, when we allow ourselves to be connected to other who are sad, there is no gesture of kindness that is wasted, no offer of compassion that is useless. We can be generous to every sorrow we see. Embracing pain is sacred work.

Now, in his book "Wait – A Love Letter to Those in Despair," Cuong Lu describes a practical way to be present to our pain. Here is a summary of this spiritual practice that helps us live in the way that God has actually created the universe, with pain. Here is the practice.

Instead of acting on the impulses to hide or reject suffering, stop, wait, and study the details of your life. Look at the skin on your hands, feel the despair in your throat, notice the bodily sensation of the searing currents running through your veins. Study these things as if your life depended on it. When you stay fully present with your feelings, your embodied sensations, and the world around you, even when it seems dark and cold, joy will arise. Joy and suffering are two sides of the same coin. As difficult as it may be, the way to free yourself from pain is to feel it, and not to run away. Here is an odd image to grasp. Be a mountain and be porous at the same time. Become interested in yourself, your thoughts, your emotions, your embodied sensations. This might not make sense now, but it will.

Pain and suffering make life beautiful. This might be hard to believe while you're suffering, but the lessons you can learn from hardships are jewels to cherish. If

you're suffering, it means you have a heart. Suffering is evidence of your capacity to love, and only those who understand suffering can understand life and help others. The world needs your suffering, your courage, and your strength. Don't try to kill your pain. And, don't shy away from those around you who are in pain. They need you in their life, just like you need others when you are suffering. We need to be there for one another.

This may not seem like a message of comfort. God created pain as part of the universe, so in response we must acknowledge it, process it, and come out the other side in a way that leads to beauty. And, if you are in a lot of pain then get help, a trusted friend, a counselor, someone who has been through pain themselves. Some of you have already learned this life lesson. Some of you are in the midst of learning how to be in the midst of pain. The Syrophenician woman used her pain to approach Jesus with an audacious request. When he was first reluctant, perhaps the woman caused some pain in Jesus that prompted him to perform the healing. And, notice that Jesus first asked the deaf, mute man if he was in pain and wanted to be healed. Not all differently-abled people are in pain or want healing. And, today on this Labor Day weekend of 2021, I wonder what we can do to be with those in or from Afghanistan who are in pain. Pain and suffering are part of creation. God is present in our grief. We grow and change in ways we can scarcely imagine. As with God, it is a miracle when we are present with one another in our pain.