

FIVE AFTER PENTECOST – 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

“[Jesus] strictly ordered that no one should know this,” Mark tells us. So much for telling people to keep a secret! If there is one thing that Jesus never seemed able to bring about was keeping things quiet about him—especially the healing stories. I think it is simple enough why he wanted to keep these stories quiet or at least low-key: Jesus thought his primary calling was to preach and embody God’s love to humanity, love that is a free gift. Yet a powerful healing or a powerful experience of an abundance of food, as in the feedings of 4,000 and 5,000, or the great catch of fish carried with them the possibility of tying people to such an action, making them dependent on the possibility of that going on forever, and Jesus never shows any inclination to go against God’s gift of free will to every human being to make choices, even choices about believing in God or not.

Yet Jesus did allow this gift of healing to happen through him and around him. Sometimes he chose to do it, as he did with the healing of Jairus’ daughter; sometimes he found it happening without having any intentions about it, like with this woman who had been very sick for so long. This was an incredible, a rare, a fantastic gift. Jesus seemed to be able to lead people to imagine and hope for the impossible, and when they did, especially if it was about healing or inner growth or faith, it came true—maybe not always, but many times, countless times.

We have two such stories today, one about a prominent man, a leader of the synagogue—who even has a name, Jairus—and his daughter, and another story about an unidentified woman, who, in that society would have been a non-person. These are both serious matters.

The man believes that his daughter is on the verge of death, saying, "Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live." Jesus took him seriously and began to walk with him, and later healed the daughter. I want to stay with the story of this very interesting woman.

The story in the midst of all this is about a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years. We can only begin to imagine how depleted she was of any energy. I have to wonder how she had the physical strength to walk around. Even more, how did she have the spiritual energy to be able to maintain hope. I can attest that for chronically exhausted people hope is well-nigh impossible; that takes energy. Yet she did hang onto hope, and however much hope she had, Jesus told her that's what made her well. Oh yes, she touched him, but he puts this all on her: "Your faith has made you well."

Let's be clear: it is not always true that our faith can make us well. But the converse is true: if we have no faith that we can be made well, then we surely will not be. Somehow, we have to be a part of it, participate in it, invest our hope in the possibility, even the likelihood of being made well.

Stories like these so often take me back to stories from my own life and ministry. In my first year of parochial ministry, a woman named Sue was diagnosed with a virulent cancer. Sue was in her early thirties, was married to a research Ob-Gyn at the university hospital and had three children about 7, 6 and 4. I remember seeing the children at the beginning of my first summer, always immaculately groomed, very polite, well-behaved, and usually very cheery. Sue was diagnosed with a fast-growing cancer in late summer and the rector saw her regularly to offer pastoral care. He was called to another ministry at some

distance away and left in early February, so it was up to me to continue offering whatever help I could as her pastor.

One day, out of my great affection and respect for her, and probably feeling very inadequate, I blurted out, “Oh Sue, you are such a wonderful person. I only wish I had the gift of healing so I could lay hands on your head, say a prayer and ask God to do a miracle and take away this awful cancer.

To my surprise, Sue responded, “Oh Jim, that’s very nice and I know what you mean, but I’ve already had my miracle.” “Oh,” I said, “Tell me more,” and I sat back and listened. She began by telling me what I already knew—how much she loved her children. Then she added what I did not know, that she had been overly compulsive and fussy as a mother, wanting them always to look and act exactly right. She told me that one day she came to a new awareness: “I came to see my children for who they really are and not for what I was trying to make them. I so like what I see in them and love them all the more.”

As I have remembered her words over almost five decades ago, I am reminded that being healed—or, in another way to say that, “being made well”—is not always about remission from a disease. There is a wonderful petition in the Great Litany (p. 149, BCP), when we pray, “from dying suddenly and unprepared, Good Lord, deliver us.” I believe Sue’s new awareness of her children—as who they really were—was preparing her to let go of them, preparing her to die.

There is more to this story. I continued to visit Sue until I accepted a call that spring to another parish over a hundred miles away. Pastorally, we visited and prayed regularly until then. In late July, I got a call from another parishioner telling me that Sue was actively dying and that she was asking to see me before she died.

The following Saturday I drove back to see her. At the door, Dr. Dave, her husband, greeted me and thanked me for coming but apologized profusely, saying that she was on so many drugs she was not likely to be lucid for more than a few minutes, if at all, she might not even recognize me. Knowing that our sense of hearing is the last sense we lose, I hoped that she might at least hear any prayer I offered, and that it might be comforting and helpful.

When we entered the room, Dave mentioned my name and told Sue I had come to see her. Sue immediately brightened, and when Dave left, she began to talk. One time, for less than a minute, she went off somewhere, slurring her words, but other than that for 75 minutes Sue was totally lucid and was compelled to share what she had been through. The important part was this: Dave, as a research physician, worked things out with her doctors, his colleagues, to care for her at home, and he cared for her completely, with the help of some friends who brought meals, took Sue to appointments, and all those things that Chris and Nancy do and help you to do when we have a fellow parishioner in a similar situation. Dave did this wonderfully well, except for one thing: he decided that he should be as stoic as possible and not show any of his emotions, any of his grief and hurt while he was in the room with her. He hoped his grief might not bring her down emotionally. But one day earlier that week, Dave lost it; as he was changing IVs and giving Sue meds, he was sobbing, and his tears were falling on her and her bedclothes. Sue thought she would do best not mention this to him, because he clearly thought he had failed her. Sue grabbed my hand, looked into my eyes, and said, "That was when I felt and knew just how much he loves me." That was another miracle for Sue, which she wanted to share with me, given the depth of our pastoral relationship. We talked more. I remember none of that, but I

shall not forget the core of our conversation. I prayed for her and her family and blessed Sue and we both knew that was our good-bye.

Most of the time we clergy keep our pastoral conversations in strict confidence, but occasionally there are times we share what another person needs to hear. That was one of them. When I rejoined Dave in the living room, he immediately shared his guilt at not having held himself together that day earlier in the week. I could share what that meant to Sue, that it was a precious gift, a joy and a blessing. What a relief that was to Dave, and I learned later how much they were able to share in her last week of life.

It was experiences like this that formed me as a pastor and priest. I am sure Ken, Dick and Steve can share many similar stories from their long ministries, and now Jennifer LaPorte and Barbara Schjoneman can as well from their chaplaincies.

I want to note a few things about these experiences: yes, we pastors want to be helpful, but in the face of overwhelming disease or other illness, we do not know what to do, and we do not even know what to say. We show up to listen and to care—and we may be given a helpful word to say. More likely, we are used in ways that we do not know. We may be the human beings through whom God's grace flows, and often we do not know it. At other times, like when Jesus felt some movement within him when the Spirit healed that woman, we may perceive such a movement within us, but it is very clear that this is not about me (or us in the case of other pastors). If it were myself, I would imagine that it would be a gift I could turn on and off as I chose. Not

so. Other pastors and I can only open ourselves to be available as a channel of God's love and grace.

I had intended to include at length this wonderful passage from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, yet the healing stories have made this sermon long enough except for me to offer a simple summary of what is going on. A year or so before, Paul had asked this congregation to take up a collection to send to the poor Christians in Jerusalem, people whom they did not know nor have any reason to care for. They started to, but then lost energy and commitment. Today he is reminding them how much God has done for them, that God has not and never will force them to do anything, even to do good for others.

Paul is also telling them that they learned to see themselves as more wondrous than they ever imagined. He tells them that that gift usually results in receiving the enrichment of an inner spirit of liberality, of generosity, and that they might learn to love others whom Jesus loves as much as he loves them and died for them as well. Paul is trying to awaken in them a sense of undying gratitude, which is the supreme motive of liberality.

Paul makes a second appeal to them, and may I note that this part of this letter is every bit as persuasive as the Letter to Philemon, even though it is more subtle. Paul describes God's economy, that we are never asked to give more than we can afford, but that our hearts are to go out to another simply because the other is there and has a need. The key to all of this is balance according to need: "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." We might note that we are at the worst of that imbalance our American society has ever known, and we have chosen it. We need to do something about that. *Amen.*

+JLJ