

Sermon Proper 8B1 June 27, 2021 Fr. Nick Smith

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27 Psalm 130 2 Corinthians 8:7-15 Mark 5:21-43

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen

Jesus was a busy guy. There was much he wanted to do. His days, as we hear in this reading from Mark's Gospel, were full of crowds, pressing in on him no matter to which shore of the Lake he sailed. They had apparently heard of his miracles of healing, and had a hungry curiosity to see for themselves, or perhaps they came with the wild expectation that they themselves might be healed. There was no shortage of opportunity for Jesus' ministry during those days in Galilee. He was very busy. And yet this narrative, which Mark thought important enough to be written down and remembered, is not about some great speech Jesus gives to the large crowd which has gathered around, but rather about his personal encounter with two individual people who have come with sincere pleas for help. Two people out of the hundreds pressing on him. And about how he notices each one. And about the generosity he shows each one. Jairus, the leader of the synagogue, was just one among the hundreds in that crowd which met Jesus by the sea, but over all the noise of the crowd, Jesus heard his desperate plea for his daughter and so, as Mark so succinctly puts it, Jesus went with him. Meanwhile, another desperate soul, the woman with the apparently incurable condition, touches his cloak, convinced that even that small gesture will bring her healing. What Jesus says to each of these troubled people is famously cryptic: "your faith has made you well" and "Do not fear, only believe". This is what God desires and this is what Jesus teaches: the faith we share, a belief that love will conquer, has power. The power to re-invigorate, the power to make whole.

So, why did he sternly instruct those amazed family members not to tell anyone about her healing? Well, surely he must have known that the word would get out somehow no matter what he told them. But clearly he didn't want it advertised. He didn't want them to publish it in their newsletter. He didn't want them tell a story which many would have trouble believing. He didn't want his ministry to be reduced to tall tales. What he wanted was that everyone should experience the power of love first-hand, not in some random story being spread around the lake country. For it was through firsthand experience that God's Spirit might truly be revived in their hearts, and not be misunderstood as some magic trick. That's all well and good, you might say, but how then does this have anything to do with us? you might ask. How are we then to have such firsthand experience? I mean, that was long ago and far away. As astonishing and as interesting as these healing stories are, they happened two thousand years ago in the ANE, where Jesus himself was present for a time, in flesh and blood. What about all the other people of the time? In Africa, for example, or China, or India, or Australia, or even here in the Americas? We don't have any Bible stories about Jesus being in those places! Or what about us today in our own generation? Why are we being denied the full physical presence of Christ? Why can't we just reach out and touch the hem of his garment here and now to be healed of all those infirmities we endure? It's a fair question.

Moreover, why are we denied the experiences David is said to have enjoyed? God was right there with him, we are told, bringing him success that was personal and obvious. God's creative power was walking with him, making new opportunities for triumph and accomplishment. As victorious as he was in his time and place, there was no question that he was not alone in his achievements, but rather that God was behind them. So, what about us? It's a fair question, especially if we are lured into reading scripture as history. The Bible is meant, I think, to reveal profound truths and to reassure us that those truths are indelibly self-evident for us even today. But how, in heaven's name, can we experience what those ancient men and women did? Well, there is a short little phrase in the Nicene Creed which might offer us a way to appreciate that question. Not to understand it exactly, but to appreciate it. One little phrase, and can you guess what it is?

The Nicene Creed, BTW, as I have reminded you before, is not Holy Scripture! True, we say 'Amen' at the end of the text, but only to proclaim our agreement with its content; we don't say 'The word of the Lord, thanks be to God'. No, the Nicene Creed was developed over many years during the 4th century, at two consecutive conventions of bishops. It was written by committee. Now, we can give those bishops the benefit of the doubt

that they were all faithful, God-centered people, but they didn't always agree in their apprehension, their understanding of God. They were trying to establish doctrine, to use the evidence of scripture, tradition, and prayerful experience to, once and for all, determine the fundamentals of Christian belief for all people in all generations. That's why it is written in plural, 'We believe' in this and that. But there were certainly some sticking points, as you can imagine. Jolly old St. Nicholas was there, incidentally, and it is said that he got into a little fist-fight over the wording.

So, can you guess what that little phrase is? The one which might help us appreciate how our relationship with God can be as fresh and effective as it was for Biblical heroes and Judean commoners? There are two major ways by which God's power is said to impact us, aren't there. First, God the Father creates. The creative Parent makes all things, including us. Out of nothing, God the Source creates things, creates science, creates opportunities, creates blessings. And what does God the Father use to put all these things together? What's the glue of creation? Divine Love! That's the first great Biblical revelation and reassurance. And the second is like unto it: When things, or people, get broken, God the Christ repairs, restores, and resurrects them...using that same divine adhesive, Love. Christ, as you know, is the master of resurrection, and a real artist and craftsman when it comes to putting things back together. Healing, making whole again, restoration, Christ does it all. And not with magic or incantation, but with love. He has been very busy!

Creation and redemption. They are the two great works of God. And they are indeed incredibly profound. And there is evidence all through the Biblical record of how that's supposed to work, at least for some specified ancient peoples. But what about us in our time and place? Well, those old bishops, meeting in the town of Nicea outside the new Roman capital of Constantinople, wrote a short but important phrase in Greek which, translated into English, says: 'We believe in the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son.' [Now, one of the contentious arguments at the convention was whether the Spirit proceeds from just the Father or from both the Father and the Son, but that's a rabbit hole we can ignore for the moment; our Episcopal version says from both.] The amazing works of God are brought to you in living color by the Holy Spirit, the bishops proclaimed. The universal truths of God's dream are carried spiritually to all times and places by an emissary, an advocate, one which inspires all persons and keeps them in eternal life. The two remarkable themes of God's dream, creation and resurrection, are kept alive by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God, which animates all life and fills our hearts as well as the spaces in-between us, the Spirit which flies low and close among us even here this morning, reveals and reassures that God makes us, God loves us, and God keeps us. The Spirit is an initiative from God, persistently rapping on our doors and walls, on our hearts and minds. But how do we open the door to encounter the creative blessings and the spiritual healing that the Holy Spirit offers?

Earlier this week we had a wedding rehearsal and walk-through for Bryan and Yue, the couple who were married here at church yesterday. When we came to the part of the Prayer Book service when each makes their vows, Bryan was puzzled by the rubrics, the instructions, which the book gives. It says: 'The groom, facing the bride and taking her right hand in his, says...' Then, when he has said his vows, the rubric continues: 'then they loose their hands, and then the bride takes his right hand in hers, and says...' So, the puzzling question is: why not just continue to hold right hands through the whole vow-making? Why loose hands, only to immediately take them again? What's the point the liturgy is trying to make? It's a fair question. Well, the symbolism here in the marriage rite is that each is shown by these gestures to be reaching out to the other in turn. Each demonstrates that he or she is initiating contact and inviting the partner into relationship. It may seem and look a bit silly and awkward and redundant, but the act of reaching-out represents a very personal and intimate request. Think of the Holy Spirit's initiative in this way, too. God's Spirit is reaching out a hand to each of us, in a loving gesture of invitation, hoping to share God's creative and redemptive dream with us, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God reaches out a hand to us, hoping we will permit this intimate contact. And when God's vows have been heard, may we also reach out and invite the Spirit to be in relationship with each of us, forever. Those whom God has joined together, let none threaten to put asunder. Amen