

2 Corinthians 8:7-15 *Encouragement to Be Generous*

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For it is the eagerness that counts, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.

Mark 5:21-43 *A Girl Restored to Life and a Woman Healed*

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.” So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and touched his cloak, for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Proper 8) July 2, 2006

Student Minister: Irene Jenkins

2 Cor 8:7-15

Mark 5:21-43

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Making Lemonade

If I was sitting in a pew right now I would likely be asking myself: What connection is there between the first and second reading? What does measuring one's abundance vs. another's need have to do with being saved through touching the cloak of Jesus. And, if I glanced at the sermon title, I'd be wondering how either of these relate even remotely to making lemonade? Though it's a holiday weekend, I'd hope to get more out of this than a ministerial recipe for lemonade. I will hold off on the theologically inspired lemonade for now and start with the confusion of today's readings.

The first passage can leave us doubtful of our ability to reach Christian standards of charity and the second seems to send us to take refuge in the nearest cloak for an answer to our prayers. In his letter to Corinthians, Paul tells people to finish what they start, be committed to giving in accordance with one's gifts, and strive towards a fair balance between the abundance and needs of all people. Of course he preempts this by saying that this is not supposed to come as a pressure-filled command but rather as an *opportunity* and invitation. Hmm. No pressure... In the second selection, from the Gospel of Mark, we could be lulled into complacency by hearing words of the saving work of Jesus. Perhaps this is the reward for our "voluntary" giving? In straightforward Mark fashion, he tells us of the woman who had been suffering for twelve years who tugged at his cloak in the town square. Jesus confronts her and she falls before him in fear and trembling, admitting she had reached for him. Mark then ends the account with one sentence- Jesus says to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." How is this mysterious healing linked to the charity in the first passage? Are they related? Or, are we supposed to give vigorously in one area of our lives and then in the other part wait patiently for saving?

After seeing the apparent contrast between the two lectionary passages, I tripped upon a relevant Time magazine column on healing. I thought that the discussion might shed some light on the healing's significance for us today. In the piece "God Does not want you to be Sick," the journalist highlighted the saving work of Methodist minister Scott Morris. Morris argues that 1/3 of the Bible is dedicated to healing people and thus Christians should take that as their top priority. He said his biggest problem was dealing with people who said that it was God's will for them to be sick. Other patients resisted his treatment saying "my Jesus will take care of me". Reading on, I noticed that many folks had responded to the words of Morris. To my surprise, most of them thought that God had a hand in their illness. In the words of one reader, "You see I believe sickness is one of Gods tools to get us to sit up and take account of ourselves to become closer to him, even if the end result is death and not a healing. Everyone has a sad story to tell and everyone will get some disease on this earth...it is all in how we approach it and acknowledge that the bottom line is that God is still in control." This comment left me wondering, is that all? If we follow this line of thought, we would find meaning and purpose in all suffering, and be left hoping for a miracle cure since God is after all "still in control".

I don't know about you...but I cannot sit back and tell someone who has lost a loved one that it was part of God's plan, a "tool" to get us to "sit up and take account of ourselves". Don't tell me that my grandmother's fight with Parkinson's disease is a tool to help her. Don't tell me that the people at the Outdoor Church are being taught that "God is still in control". Don't tell me that a 43 year old mother of 2 young children was

left by her husband to “take better account of herself”. Don’t tell me that victims of Katrina and Iraq should stand by and wait for “Jesus to take care of them”. Hearing these responses from real people was and is tremendously disturbing to me. Though faith is not evaluated on the same basis as reason, I refuse to believe that Jesus is telling us to wait on stand by for the next miracle flight.

In my feeling that Jesus would not leave us high and dry, I scoured the texts in search of the missing link. After all, we encounter this story of the woman in need of healing in three different gospels. Why did Mark include the story? In comparing the passage with other versions of the story, we learn more from what Mark leaves out than what he keeps in. Rather than emphasizing the saving work of Jesus, Mark highlights his interaction with the sick woman. There is no exclamation of his star power, of his ability to turn even the most afflicted away in good health. No, the real miracle according to Mark’s Jesus is the faithfulness of the prostrating woman: “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

In trying to grasp the intended connection of today’s readings, I find myself remembering my first job in Cambridge. Looking for quick summer employment, I jumped at my first offer- at the Coop bookstore. After reviewing my ‘skill set’ as a Divinity School student, the manager remarked, I’ve got the perfect placement for you... imagining being assigned to the 3rd floor philosophy, religion and psych. section, or the second floor fiction area, or even the information desk at the first floor, I almost choked when I was assigned to the children’s basement level. What could I possibly learn down there? On day two of the job, I was given the opportunity to lead story time. Rolling my eyes in private, I shuffled away to find the story of the day. Overwhelmed by the pictures of animals, children’s potty-training and tooth-brushing tutorials, I was lost. Finally I settled upon the shortest book I could find- *Alex and the Amazing Lemonade Stand*. It couldn’t be that bad... it *was* summer after all.

I must admit, I learned more from reading that story than any text laid on me through my college education. It was often remarked that the most intelligent people should be able to explain any important concept to an audience of seven year olds. I realized that day that the reverse is also true--- We can learn about some of the most important issues from the lives of young people. The story of *Alex and the Amazing Lemonade Stand* is a true tale about the life of Alex Scott, a brave young girl who was diagnosed with neuroblastoma cancer at the age of 1. Written for children, the story gently presented the news--- The doctor looked her over and said “She is sick. She needs strong medicine. It better be quick.” Alex showed no fear, not even a pout, Although the medicine made her hair fall out. “My curls will grow back,” little Alex said, “Now somebody, please help me out of this bed!” Alex was determined to feel better again, but that is not where her determination would end. Alex was brave and strong and tough but still the medicine wasn’t enough. She said to herself when she felt sick one day, “There must be something to make my sickness go away. What could it be? What can I do to help myself and others too?” In her biography, we learn that Alex had started to beat the odds of her illness but at age 3 had a reoccurrence of tumors. The day after her fourth birthday, Alex received a stem cell transplant and informed her mother, “When I get out of the hospital I want to have a lemonade stand.” She said she wanted to give the money to the doctors to help them find a cure. True to her word, she held her first lemonade stand later that year and raised an amazing \$2000 for “her hospital.” The story tells of the

many stands held and the children who wrote to Alex during her fight. The tale ends with these words: There's a lesson to be learned from the Lemonade Girl with the pretty blue eyes and hair that once curled. You see, Alex lives by the world from which her foundation was laid...when life gives you lemons, just make lemonade." I looked into the story of Alex and learned that she passed away in 2004 at age 8. Her dream lived on, as over 4000 lemonade stands were held in 2004-2005 alone. The movement that Alex started has inspired millions and given hope that no matter what our situation, we can make lemonade.

As I think back to the comments of Christians who claimed that God had a hand in their illness or who were sure that God was in control, I cannot help but apply their words to Alex. How could you possibly say to Alex that she should wait around and take better account of herself? When we consider the message of today's readings, Alex comes to mind. Much like the woman who suffered for years on end, Alex was confronted with an illness that was beyond her control. The point of Mark's Gospel was not to tell us that all people who are suffering will be cured, but rather that WE must be a part of any true healing. Anyone can hope for a miracle cure, but healing requires that we are present in the process. It is not a quick fix, and it does not mean that we will overcome anything. In looking back to the Greek word for healing, we find that the root word means wholeness. Though Alex's life was short, there is no question about the wholeness of her life. She faced her situation with courage and charity. Rather than despairing over her own battle, she spent her time strategizing about lemonade stands and helping others to heal.

When I think of faith, the words about following God's plan and finding meaning in suffering just do not work. I see more faith in Alex's ability to make lemonade from lemons than I do in the hollow words from the Time magazine column. If we were intended to ride standby on the next miracle flight, why would Mark have downplayed the role of Jesus in the story? Why would Paul have said that ultimately charity is up to us—rather than some command from on high? The words of Kierkegaard come to mind here- Faith is being out over 70,000 fathoms of water and swimming. It can mean that we don't see a sign of the shoreline, it can mean that cancer and parkinson's and divorce are a part of this painful and beautiful story of our lives. What it cannot mean is that we ride standby. It is in the stories of Alex and courageous men, women and children that we can find the faith that is livable. I pray today that we can each be lead and inspired by Mark's story and the modern day tale of Alex. Let us be called to support one another through life's lemons and have faith in God to help us make lemonade. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Go in peace to serve God and your neighbor in all that you do.

We are sent in Christ's name.

The Lord make glory shine upon you

And be gracious to you.

The Lord look upon you with favor

And give you peace, now and in the time to come.

Amen.