

## 11 Pentecost August 21, 2022

### We are receiving a kingdom...

The visit I had with a patient in the hospital that morning was not a visit I felt very good about. As chaplains, we strive to be present with those we visit, to listen to them and, if it is the patient's desire, to pray with them. I can promise you that I do not always hit those worthwhile goals. This woman was in pain and barely acknowledged me. She was frail and was close to being in a fetal position. What she did say, for most of the time I was in her room, was the Hail Mary – continually, beginning again as soon as she had finished. The Hail Mary is the prayer our Catholic brethren pray to Our Lord's mother, using the greeting to Mary from Elizabeth when the pregnant cousins saw each other and ending with an intercession to Mary. I left her room feeling I had not been able to serve her very well in any capacity.

Later that day, Lisa, the lead chaplain came to me with a request. Would I be willing give Sacrament of the Sick/Last Rites for a patient later that afternoon? The patient was Catholic, had Covid and there were no Catholic priests who were able to visit her and give her Last Rites for at least a few days. Though the nursing staff did not believe it was imminent, they believed this woman was near death. God knew the hour and the day. This was the woman I had seen earlier that morning. When, with some trepidation, I said yes, Lisa asked if I would like her to assist me. I told her no, thinking I had already had a not-so-great visit that day and I was still a fairly new deacon. I did not want to look like a fool in front her. Not long after that, the Holy Spirit whispered to me, "It's not about you, Steve." I went back and told Lisa that we would visit this woman together.

Later that day, we met in the chaplain's office. We got oil for anointing and a Book of Common Prayer that a nearby Episcopal church had donated and headed to this woman's room. We donned our masks, gloves and gowns for our protection. I will tell you more than protected, I simply felt awkward. We knocked and entered this woman's room. She was praying the Hail Mary; I could hear the pain in her voice.

Lisa stood on one side of her bed and very patiently explained to her who we were and that we would be giving her sacrament of the sick with anointing. The patient continued praying. I handed Lisa the Book of Common Prayer, opened to page 462, so she could hold it for me.

*Almighty God, look on this your servant, lying in great weakness...* I began

**Holy Mary, be with us now, and at the hour of our death...** the patient prayed, though it almost felt like a mantra. Lisa and I prayed the prayers from the prayer book, I anointed the woman with oil, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, reminding her she was Christ's own forever. We prayed the Lord's Prayer and concluded with the Collect. I touched her shoulder with my gloved hand.

Sometime during those last moments, she relaxed; she stopped praying. She was at peace. We both watched her, not sure if she was still breathing. Yes, she was still breathing. She was calm. We waited a few minutes then quietly left her room. We spoke briefly about at what we had just had the privilege to witness. No question, it was God, the peace of God. And yes, it was the peace that passes all understanding. This was not about us chaplains being worthy, though we might allow for the faith of this woman who turned to continual prayer in her pain. I can tell you the words coming out of my mouth if I am in pain will not be prayerful. I have anointed people before and it is holy experience. In that patient's room... to me that was the Kingdom of God breaking through into our lives.

In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus is teaching in a synagogue. Jesus is often at the Jewish temple but here he is at one of the neighborhood synagogues, one of almost 400 in first century Jerusalem. Perhaps the number of people gathered there that morning would be not so different from the number of us gathered here at St. Cyprian's. It is a sabbath; the word sabbath appears five times in these eight verses! Luke is intentional in telling us this.

Before we open that up, let us imagine ourselves in that synagogue on that sabbath. Most synagogues had benches around the walls for the more prominent people. The center was open; the common people sat on the floor. Where do you see yourself on that morning, bench or floor? As the teacher, the rabbi, Jesus is the focus of the faithful Jews in attendance as they listen to him interpret and explain the reading. **And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years. She was bent over and unable to stand up straight.** Has she slipped in quietly after the beginning, hoping not to be noticed? When I read that Jesus called her over, I wondered about that. This woman must have had a difficult time walking. Why wouldn't Jesus go to her?

Theologian Joel Green posits that because her illness caused her to be bent over, she may have been "socially invisible". In first-century Judaism, illness was often thought of as resulting from sin or, at the very least, God's disfavor. By calling her over, Jesus has made her visible to her community. **Woman, you are set free from your ailment. When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight.** This is the heart of Jesus! Eighteen long years she has suffered – physically, emotionally, spiritually. Jesus has made her whole physically; her emotional and spiritual healing has begun. Matthew Henry points out that when Jesus identifies her as a daughter of Abraham, he is saying that she is their sister. She's not simply part of their community, she is family! If we allow Jesus to do so, that is what he will do for us. The healing may not be as dramatic as this woman's was, but Jesus will heal us. We are all family!

The kingdom of God has broken into this woman's life not because of who she is but because of who God is. Her part in her healing? Moving towards Jesus when he called her. And, I think it's fair to add, her being present in the synagogue. Maybe as she walked about her village that week, she heard about this itinerant rabbi who was opening up the sacred scriptures on the sabbaths.

The kingdom of God has broken into the lives of all present that morning. Eighteen years this woman has suffered. There can be no one who does not know about her. They have witnessed an astounding cure and now they hear this woman praising God. They may well be on the brink of joining in with her when the leader admonishes them that healings are a form of work that a good Jew does not engage in on the sabbath.

Beloved, the sabbath is good and it is holy. It behooves us to set aside a day that is all about God. Limited physical activity so that our hearts, minds and spirits are more attune to God's voice. A sabbath walk is an acceptable distance that a Jewish person can walk on the sabbath. St. Augustine historian David Nolan has identified the homes in the area where Fr. Ted and Caren lived along Maria Sanchez Lake as being a sabbath's walk to First Congregation Sons of Israel, the synagogue on Cordova Street. Many Jewish residents of years past chose to live there because of that fact. Their honoring of God helped to determine where they would live.

Jesus does not disagree with the leader on observing the sabbath. The rub here is that the Jewish leaders have chosen to define healing as work. Jesus does not argue that the only *work* he did was laying

his hands on the woman and speaking one sentence. That sounds pretty minimal to our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears!

The Jewish sabbath observances were so complete that they extended to their animals. Jesus points out the law allowed for an animal to be untied and led to water on the sabbath. How much more important is this woman-**a daughter of Abraham**-who has been bound not for one day but for 18 years to be set free! Rather than breaking the sabbath, this healing points to God, and so is appropriate sabbath behavior. It is to be celebrated, not condemned. Can you hear Jesus saying, **“The kingdom of God is at hand!”**?

Jesus has addressed the leader of the synagogue as a hypocrite. We can very easily make Jesus the good guy – by the way, he always is- and make the leader the bad guy in this narrative. I will caution against our being too harsh on the leader. He takes care of the synagogue, the Torah scrolls and other sacred writings, and announces the coming sabbath with blasts on the shofar, the ram’s horn. But he has gotten so focused on the rules that he has lost sight of the healing that Jesus has just performed. As liturgical people, we can focus so much on “getting it right” that, like the leader, we miss out on the joy.

Who do you identify with in this morning’s narrative?

Are you among those who have been gathered in to the synagogue? Are you rejoicing with this woman, this daughter of Abraham, who has been restored to health?

Are you one who, through faith, prayer and charity, seeks to further the Kingdom of God in this world? Not seeing yourself *as* Jesus, but rather seeing yourself as his sister or brother, seeking to do the work to which he calls us.

Do you identify as the leader? Not a popular choice. I, too, have been a hypocrite. I think we can all get caught up in how to do things just so that we might miss the kingdom breaking into our lives. For me, it was only by God’s grace that I saw the kingdom in that hospital room.

Do you identify as the woman? Maybe in your life you have been “socially invisible” or even worse, socially unacceptable for no good reason. For being the person God created you to be. Has Jesus told you that you are precious beyond measure? Or are you still waiting to hear those words?

Beloved, you are precious beyond measure.

Let us pray that when the kingdom breaks into our world, we will be witnesses to that. We will not always see it even if it right before us. We will be distracted at times. This is not about perfection. Here’s one place where we can begin. When Fr. Mal places communion in your hand this morning, the real presence of Jesus, remember this is the same Jesus who healed that woman all those centuries ago. His kingdom, though at times it does not seem that way, is coming, now in simple ways, and in fullness when he returns, restoring all of creation.

**Since we are receiving a kingdom, let us give thanks.**

Amen.