

Back on the Chain Gang -- Proper 8B

Back and forth across the Sea of Galilee Jesus is going in these stories that Mark tells us about the healing power of love. Time and again we see Jesus arriving in a community and dispelling the forces of pain, confusion and disease. He does this by his presence, by making the suffering people there aware of the possibility of healing. The moment they say yes, they are well.

Evelyn Underhill once wrote, "There are no colds in paradise." When Jesus appears, paradise is visible and present and sure enough, the sickness goes away. It's a sweet, sweet spirit story coming down to us 2000 years along its way.

But hey, when we do get a cold, here on Earth, it doesn't occur to many of us to ask Jesus to take it away. Honestly, I don't think my cough would have instantly disappeared if I did. Nevertheless they do go away. I had the influenza over Christmas, and it had me incapacitated for several days. This experience tells me two things: 1: Despite the stunning beauty of summer days, the birds and trees and everything, this isn't paradise, because we do get sick once in awhile. Hopefully only once in awhile. And 2: Maybe the power of these stories about Jesus is not as literal or explicit as we might think. It's a clear wellspring, but deep.

Now there are many times when this corner of the world does seem like paradise. But there are also times, especially in the June gloom, when it seems cold and damp, so one could get

confused. Likewise there are times when life is glorious and perfect; the kids are thriving, the checkbook balances, the gifts we give bring joy. But what about the confusion that arrives with tragedy, impoverishment and brokenness? Life doesn't seem like paradise then, no matter how many kinds of wildflowers we can count. What then?

Well, then is when we can bring ourselves back to the stories of Jesus. We can become more aware of God's presence, open our hearts to love, and allow that sweet spirit to cloud our consciousness with the possibility of healing.

As a bridge over a raging river can connect worlds that seemed utterly inaccessible to each other, so a life lived in the awareness and employment of the healing grace of God's love is a life that glimpses the other world -- the paradise across the River Jordan -- through all the mortality and confusion the world has to offer.

"If I could just touch the hem of His garment," goes the old Sam Cooke song, "I know I'll be made whole, right now." What a story! Snap-cracking with allusions and things to think about. The woman, like Jairus daughter is at the very edge of society, the very edge of existence, and yet she stands for all of Israel -- all of us. She has suffered and bled for twelve years -- one year for each of the tribes of Israel. When a woman bleeds, she becomes unclean, according to the custom of that time and place. There are places in the world where they still do that, class a woman as impure during shark week, even going so far as to put them out of the house, like Fred Flintstone's cat. As

with Fred and the cat, however, when Man decides to battle Nature, Nature always wins, one way or another. So to say this woman has bled for twelve years running is to put her in an absurd class of humanity, where her own people place her far beyond any hope of redemption and reintegration into society.

Likewise Jairus daughter. Big surprise, she's twelve years old – that's one year for each of the tribes of Israel, in other words, one year for each of us. She stands at the cusp of her usefulness to society, about to become a woman. Only she doesn't stand, she lies down and dies. She will be mourned and missed, but she won't be of any use to anybody.

These two females represent the edges of society -- the woman is at the lowest edge and falling off. Jairus daughter, who as the child of a leader would be very important (for a female) but she's dead. She floats off the highest end of the society -- no use to anybody.

What Jesus does is bring them back into the mix, "go in peace" he says to the woman, "give her a sandwich" he says to the girl's family, and they're up and about, good to go. As Saint Paul observes, there is a fair balance to what Jesus gives them, not too much, not too little. In his kingdom come, those who are on the edges of society and falling off are brought back in. As the psalmist declares, out of the depths they cry, and with the Lord there is plenteous redemption! They get to have a life, a dog's chance, a fair shake.

Now noöne is set to triumph over others in this arrangement; all of us are bound for death, and oh how the mighty do fall! The illnesses of hubris and overweening pride tend to be fatal and progressive, though not incurable. Jesus will appear in each of our lives -- if only we will watch and wait and listen -- to offer each of us a fair, peaceful, and decent existence, back in the mix, back on the chain gang, in the thick of life along with everybody else.

Finally, observe how Jesus stops in his progress toward curing the emerging life of Jairus' aristocratic and important family. Jesus stops to take care of the poorest, impurest, bottommost creature first. Nothing, nothing can be accomplished in solving the new problems of important folks unless and until we stop and address the old problems of the unimportant folks first. With 40 million Americans living under the poverty line, gun proliferation out of control, and thousands of refugees being treated like criminals, it would seem that God is talking directly to us in this story. Are we listening?

Because the one characteristic in Jesus that stands out among all others is compassion. In him, as Portia describes, "The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The thronèd monarch better than his crown. His scepter shows the force of temporal power, the attribute to awe and majesty,

wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings; but mercy is above this sceptered sway. It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings; It is an attribute to God Himself.”

If we are to be called Christians, if we are to be known as civilized people, if we are to have any hope of nourishing our civilization for our children and our children’s children, we must allow ourselves to be twice blessed by taking on this mantle of mercy in all our dealings with one another. It is a quality sorely lacking in our current climate.

We begin by asking ourselves (as author Vanita Hampton Wright observes), “As I move through this day, how will I live mercifully? In a given day, I may do ordinary things, and traverse a fairly unexciting landscape. But mercy does not necessarily show up in grand gestures; most of the time mercy reveals itself in fleeting moments.

For example, mercy gives you her seat on the bus, acting as if she were about to get up anyway rather than making you feel that she is doing you a favor. Mercy does not let out that sigh -- you know the one -- the wordless disapproval toward the person in the check-out line ahead of you whose card didn't swipe, or who can't find her coupons, or whose toddler is having a meltdown. When mercy has been wronged, the offended one does not make it difficult for the offender to apologize or ask forgiveness. In fact, mercy does not wait for the other's action

but forgives so quickly that the person needing forgiveness is freer to ask for it.

Mercy makes a habit of giving others the benefit of the doubt, and relinquishes control when doing so allows another person to grow and learn. Mercy clears the way for others, so that they can walk on an even path, no matter how halting their steps or injured their souls, for 'the ground is level at the foot of the cross.'

In all these situations, mercy treats power as a sacred trust. I can be merciful because I have some sort of power, the means to affect another's life, if only for a moment. I act mercifully when I use my power to do kindness in this world. That is what's meant by 'picking up one's cross; that's what it means to be back on the chain gang: it is a chain forged of merciful acts, succeeding one another and compounding themselves as long as we live.