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Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

Sermon on Mark 5:21-43

Sunday, June 30th, 2024, Proper B

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer. Amen.

Today's Gospel reading is about suffering and healing. We tend to not question why or how healing happens. We do ask why suffering occurs. Each of us has been asked -- "since you believe in God, explain why suffering exists?"

We all sit with this very valid question. And, I cannot answer the question of why suffering exists. I acknowledge there is great suffering, experienced by people in this parish, in our city, and throughout the world. For me, the only way through suffering is by being with Jesus.

In our Gospel reading, people reach out to Jesus because they are suffering and seek healing.

We are presented with two stories about suffering – the daughter of the rabbi and the hemorrhagic woman. They are a contrast in stature, the rabbi and a shunned woman – no matter their rank in society, there is suffering. Everyone suffers.

There are two different ways the rabbi and the woman seek healing. The rabbi acts as an intercessor and the woman has no one. The father asks for the daughter – it is a deferential pleading. By asking, the rabbi both acknowledges Jesus' capacity and exposes his own helplessness. The woman, by contrast, asserts for herself and does so surreptitiously, she presses through the crowd and reaches out to touch Jesus.

As an interesting twist, the woman's suffering interrupts the story. We think the story is about the girl and then the woman appears. And her action is disruptive to most assumptions about healing. She does not ask for healing, she asserts her need and perhaps even her right to be healed. Ponder the woman's assertiveness – in her need and in her faith, the woman takes a significant risk. She pushes towards Jesus.

We cannot touch Jesus' garment, we cannot ask Jesus to touch us or someone we love. So, we reach out for Jesus, frequently through prayer.

When we pray, we model this gospel – we pray as an intercessor for others, like the father, and we pray for ourselves, like the woman

When we pray as an act of intercession, or prayers on behalf of others, we are empathically assuming the suffering of others. There are two types of “Others” we pray for – those whom we know directly and those whom we know only from a distance.

I am always ready to pray for people I know, perhaps it is a sense of familiarity as well as responsibility. I pray, I do an errand, I help in some other way.

I engage in acts of comfort and pray for intervention. And I am willing to sit still with suffering. Each of us is praying for someone we know, to heal the suffering they are experiencing.

At St. Martin’s we also pray for many people we do not know. Our prayer list is mostly anonymous, just first names. We may guess who we are praying for, but most of the prayers are for people we do not know well. The Prayers of the People are primarily for those whom we do not know directly. And we may never know what happens for these people.

Sometimes praying for other people feels awkward. We may think we have to know the person, or know what is going on. Sometimes the awkwardness comes from the extent of the tragedy the anonymous person or people are suffering...gun violence or a natural disaster. The suffering is so pervasive, we don’t know how to be with the suffering.

And then we also pray for ourselves. We are supposed to pray because we too suffer. My most uncomfortable prayers are for myself. Frequently I fail to acknowledge I need to be healed; my narrow view is that my concerns rarely rank on the barometer of suffering. Yet when I fail to ask for healing, I am perhaps paying too much attention to myself. I need to be healed to be fully available to others.

No matter whom we are praying for, we are typically hoping for some experience or circumstance to be different. We are praying for a certain outcome or renewal. Praying for healing is to take a presumptive risk. Many times, we assume we know how Jesus should heal the person, or the circumstance. Perhaps we need to be less prescriptive and just pray. Just say...” Oh Jesus, dear lord, beloved holy spirit”, recite every name of God we know and let God answer.

When I was about 10 years old, I told my mother God had not answered my prayer. Her comment was God may have answered, and I just did not like the response. Now that was harsh, but honest.

We do not determine the answer to our prayers. We just pray, we reach out, and through prayer touch Jesus' garment.

Which takes me back to the question of why suffering occurs. I do not know why. Interestingly, in this gospel reading Jesus is not asked by the father or the woman why there is suffering. Which does not mean we cannot ask that question. What is asked for is healing by Jesus and through Jesus. The answer to suffering, to be healed, is to be with Jesus. Prayer works because prayer puts us in relationship with Jesus. To be with Jesus is to be healed. Amen.