

13th Sunday of the Year [B] 2024

(Lial)

When something terrible happens, Christians often try to comfort themselves or, more often, someone else by saying that “it’s God’s will.” I have never liked that response. It seems so facile, almost a cop out. And it makes God the bad guy. But I suppose it is an effort to make sense out of something that seems so senseless.

Why else would a child be stricken with cancer or a young mother die from a devastating illness? Why else would wild fires destroy thousands of acres and hundreds of homes or a plane crash into the side of a mountain, killing everyone on board? I remember a young father who died from COVID two weeks before he was eligible for the vaccine. Why? Surely there is a reason, even if only God knows it.

Surely the God who watched his only son die on a cross is aware of human suffering. And surely the God who raised Jesus to new and lasting life can bring something good out of the most painful experiences.

But the author of today’s first reading from the Book of Wisdom rejects the notion that it was God’s idea in the first place. “God did not make death,” the Book of Wisdom insists, and goes on to say that God wants only the best for all of us. And the best for all of us is that He sent his Son to be our redeemer, the one who could heal any ill.

The Gospel of Mark, which we hear on most Sundays in this year’s cycle of the Scripture, makes this abundantly clear. Mark is sometimes called the “Miracle Gospel,” as it contains more stories of Jesus working miracles than any of the other gospels, even though it is the shortest of the four gospels.

Today's passage has two healing miracle accounts—a story within a story, and there is a lot going on with a whole cast of characters. These two miracles are powerfully recorded in the film *The Chosen*, if you have seen it. Here the drama is really life and death, and it is almost fun to keep our eyes on so many characters at once, especially the doubting disciples who always represent our own weak faith.

So in Mark's telling it, Jesus encounters a Jewish [synagogue] official, who pleads for him to come and “lay your hands” on his daughter because she is close to death, and he, as any parent would be, is desperate. Of course Jesus heads that way immediately. But life is never simple.

There is a woman there who must have overheard this talk of healing, and her heart skipped a beat. She's had heavy menstrual bleeding for twelve years. According to Jewish law, that meant that she has been “unclean” for all that time, and every chair she sits on, every table she touches, every person with whom she comes into contact are unclean as well. It was almost the same as being a leper. It has ruined her life and her spirits. What if Jesus could help her? Does she slow down his getting to the help of this child? Or does she take the chance to get relief? What an agonizing moment it must have been for her.

The woman decides to take the risk and only reaches out and touches his cloak as he whisks by. The experience of her healing fills her immediately. She knows it has happened. And Jesus feels it too. He felt her needy-trusting touch in the crowd—the most unbelievable part for the disciples: You see all these people and you ask, who touched me? But he felt his healing love go out to her.

Then we are back to the first story. Imagine the excitement of this Jewish father, seeing up close the power Jesus has as he heals this suffering woman. But then just as Jesus was in mid-sentence, telling the woman her faith has saved her, news comes that the daughter has died. *Now* imagine the father's heart. But Jesus, disregarding the message, tells the father. "Do not be afraid; just have faith." And they headed to the father's house.

Everyone was full of grief when they got there—you can imagine the wailing—and Jesus tried to call them all down. He took just the father and mother into the house, and only allowed Peter, James and John to stay (part of their special formation program, I guess!), and Jesus gave the 12-year-old her life back and gave her back to her astounded parents. And he made sure they "gave her something to eat." What a story!

Wouldn't it be wonderful if you and I could turn to Jesus this readily in our needs? Perhaps this gospel can remind us to keep our eyes fixed on him every day, even in the midst of our busy lives, our busy ways of avoiding our need for him. There are so many of us, around the world, with so many needs that his touch can truly heal.

At the very least, he can heal our doubts and fears, our dependencies on other *things*, our angers, our hurts, our judgments, our pride. Perhaps in this renewal of faith we can turn in his direction and reach out for him. Perhaps a loved one has gone to get him, in some way, to bring him to us. And it doesn't matter what obstacles lie in the way, *Jesus wants to be with us*. He wants to feel the power flow out of him into us. "Do not be afraid; just have faith."