

The Gift of Faith

Mark 5:21-24, 35-43

July 2, 2006

I.

Good morning. Before I talk about today's Scripture readings on my first day with you at St. Thomas, I would like to make a few personal comments.

We could not be more pleased to be here. I know that some of you have met my wife, Susan, but many of you have not, and so I would like to ask her to stand.

There is no doubt that God led us to St. Thomas. During the first few months of 2006 senior seminarians spent a lot of time looking at positions in which they might serve after graduation. I was no different, and considered several opportunities.

And it was clear from the beginning that there was something special about St. Thomas. Something or other just did not seem to fit at the other places, while everything we did concerning St. Thomas and Diamondhead unfolded perfectly and seamlessly.

When we came to visit St. Thomas last March it was as though we had been here before. We immediately felt like here we could serve God effectively. Even our trip down worked without a hitch. All the planes were exactly on time, the rental car was exactly where it should have been, the hotel room was fine, and all this after the huge disruption of a hurricane. Our trip back to Virginia was the same. We wondered if God was sending us a message.

Most importantly, however, the people we met were gracious and kind, and we saw right away that here was a true Christian community. Susan and I prayed about it every day thereafter, and it became clear that St. Thomas is where we were meant to be.

II.

A big part of our decision was our feeling about the church. We cannot help but just stand in awe and be amazed at the way you all have held things together on your own here in the face of unprecedented adversity.

And not only have you kept the church going, but also you have reached out to the community and offered your selves, your facilities, and your encouragement to others who lost all they had.

This would have been a difficult time even if you had a full time rector and were operating normally. The fact that you could do what you did under the circumstances with which you were faced is remarkable, and you all are to be commended for your Christian witness. Susan and I hope and pray that we can continue in the example you have set, and that together with all of you we can go even further in being a vibrant Christian community.

III.

As you can tell from the music in the service bulletin, today we recognize Independence Day. On Monday and Tuesday people all across America will celebrate liberty and freedom. The flag will wave, bands will play marches, and people will gather with ice cream, fried chicken, watermelon, and fireworks. People from many different cultures and national origins will come together to celebrate what makes America great.

And we will recall that many of our ancestors came to America for reasons that are the subjects of today's lessons from Scripture. Many of them were poor, and they sought justice, and they wanted to respond in freedom to Christ's call to believe and have faith. Stories from

the Bible continue to touch our lives and bring us closer to God, and the readings we heard today are no exception.

IV.

The Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy called us to reach out to the poor, and proclaimed that those who do will be blessed. In the New Testament reading Paul urged the Corinthians to share their abundance with those less fortunate. And Mark's Gospel records another of Jesus' miracles when he raised a young girl to life and called on people to believe and have faith.

These readings cover a lot of ground. And there is a danger in trying to do so much in a sermon is that nothing gets done well. It reminds me of the story of the fellow whose wife went to church while he stayed home. When she returned he asked her how the sermon was. She hesitated, and then said "O.K., I guess." The husband persisted and asked, "well, what did he preach about?" "I don't know," she replied, "he never did say."

Hopefully, I will avoid that problem because I want to focus on a specific message in today's Gospel. That message is that there is a direct relationship between believing, and receiving God's healing grace. Because we are human we struggle with our fears and emotions, and suffer from physical afflictions. But if we believe, if we have faith, Jesus will see us through.

V.

In understanding this message, it's useful to make three important points about what Jesus meant when he told the people to believe, which in some translations also means to have faith.

The first is that when we think of faith and belief today, we typically do so in the context of faith and belief in our salvation. We think about how God acted in Jesus Christ through the crucifixion and resurrection to deliver us from the guilt and power of sin, and to show us the way to eternal life.

But in today's Gospel, it meant something else. Jesus was still alive. Later in the Gospels, on his way to Jerusalem, he did tell his disciples how he must die and be raised again, but we are not there yet in today's Gospel. We're still in chapter five, and Jesus still is teaching in Galilee. He had not yet talked about salvation as we understand it. So what do we think he meant when he told people to believe? What did he want them to believe?

He wanted people to believe that God was acting through him in ways that would foreshadow the coming of God's kingdom. And he wanted people to believe that in accepting God's power and love through him, they could be healed. This is the first point. God will heal us.

This leads to the second point I want to make. In promising that through belief we all will be healed, Jesus did not promise that we all would be cured. There is a distinction between these two ideas of being healed and being cured.

Being healed can be spiritual. Being cured is medical. While Jesus' miracles in the Bible often resulted in medical cures, his purpose pointed toward the spiritual healing that comes with belief.

These distinctions are important. Jesus did not make the lame walk, cast out demons, and bring Jairus' daughter back to life just so he could play the role of a wonder worker. He did it to help people of the time understand God's plan for humanity, and that through Jesus Christ that plan would be fulfilled. His miracles briefly opened a window to the glory of the kingdom.

That's why stories of Jesus' miracles are an inseparable part of the Gospels. It is not possible to disregard the miracles and only look at the other parts if you want to understand Jesus' life. And, of course, understanding his death introduces a different set of theological ideas.

For example, all of Jesus' miracles are recorded in the Gospels, but none of those miracles are included in the Epistles of Paul or other New Testament letters. Those later parts of the New Testament portray God's action in Jesus Christ in terms of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection without referring to miracle stories because the authors of those biblical books focused on the significance of Christ's death. The miracle stories in the Gospels, however, emphasize the significance of Christ's life.

And Christ's life gives us hope for knowing God's peace in this world, just as Christ's death gives us hope for eternal life in the next world. By believing today just as Jesus asked people to believe when he was still with us, we also are expressing our faith today that God through the Holy Spirit is with us, just as we will be with him later.

But we know that our faith is not an insurance policy against difficulties, and that belief in the Gospel does not make our problems go away. We can pray, and some people will be cured, while others will not. If, however, we believe, then we surely will be healed even if a cure does not occur.

This brings us to the third point. It is absolutely not true to think that people are not cured because they do not have enough faith. And it is absolutely not true to think that God wants us to learn something from illness or suffering. I have heard preachers say such things, and I could not disagree more. God does not work that way.

We suffer because we live in a broken world, and broken things happen. The kingdom of God is here, but is not yet complete. Think about it. If only good things happened to good people, then God's kingdom in its fullness would already be here, and we know that is not the case.

In today's Gospel, when Jesus says to believe he wants us to believe that God's kingdom is on its way. It's not here yet, but it's getting closer, and in God's time, in God's way, it will arrive. And until that time the Gospel tells us that faith will sustain those who suffer, and will enable them to live through their worldly difficulties while they are being strengthened spiritually.

In the meantime our lives will not always go as we hope. Justice will not always prevail. Things will not always be fair. But Jesus asks us to believe, to have faith. Especially when things seem hopeless or bleak, he asks us to turn ourselves, our lives, and our plans and futures over to him. Our faith will sustain us and enable us to live into the eternal hope that all believers have, no matter what happens to us now.

VI.

A few years ago the actor and comedian Woody Allen gave a commencement address. Many of you remember Woody Allen, and might recall his dark and cynical sense of humor.

Well, in this particular commencement address, in typical fashion, he said to the graduates: "More than at any time in history, humanity faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other leads to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly."

We can thank God that we have a better choice than that. It is a choice between trusting in human flesh or in the Lord. We are called to live as Christian disciples in a confusing and chaotic world. We are called to oppose evil and maintain a just society insofar as we are able. We are called to love God and our neighbors, to support our communities, and to be good citizens.

But after having done all that we still will be faced with times when we simply have to believe. Just as Jesus told the people to believe in front of Jairus' house long ago, he wants the same from us now. *Amen.*