

## ***It Is Well With My Soul***

Mark 5:21-43

June 28, 2009

### **I.**

Today's Gospel reading could be an example of why the Episcopal Church has a lectionary. As you know, the lectionary is the book that contains the list of readings from Scripture we hear each week. It makes us preach about things we might otherwise pass over.

This reading was long, wasn't it? It also contained two stories that seem to be unrelated. In fact, the story about the bleeding woman sort of came out of nowhere to interrupt the story of Jairus' daughter. Some of you might have wondered why the reading was organized in this way.

But there is a definite relationship between these two events. Jesus restored Jairus' daughter to life, and the woman who touched his cloak was healed from her bleeding. And in both cases faith was an essential element.

And here's some additional information, no extra charge. The woman's story describes the only time in the Bible where Jesus apparently healed someone without intending to do so in advance. Even though many people in the crowd were brushing up against him, when this woman touched his cloak God's healing power flowed out to her without Jesus doing anything to make it happen.

These two stories had happy endings, didn't they? There are no hard words to explain. No one feels guilty or is challenged to higher standards. Everybody was healed and got well. The power of faith seems evident, and the outcomes can make us feel good. We might think, "That's the way things are supposed to be. If we have faith all will be well." End of story. Right?

### **II.**

Not necessarily. Sometimes we pray and our prayers don't seem to be answered. What about a father or mother whose daughter falls ill, and despite their prayers she dies? How does today's Gospel speak to them? Where is faith in tragedies like those, and how do the parents and family find strength?

And sometimes our faith works in ways we don't expect. I'm reminded of the story about a fellow shipwrecked on a desert island. After searching the island he found enough food to sustain him for a few months, and built a small shelter from some driftwood and other scraps on the beach. He knew he could survive for a while, and prayed that a passing ship would see the island and come to rescue him.

Then one day, after walking around the island, he returned only to find his shelter and food supply engulfed in flames. Everything he had built and saved was destroyed. In despair he cried out, "God, how could you do this, and he collapsed on the beach. Finally, exhausted by his desperation, he fell asleep.

Several hours later he was awakened by the sound of large engines, and saw a boat coming for him. When his rescuers arrived he asked, "how did you know I was here?" They replied, "We saw your smoke signal."

The point here is that we cannot instruct God how to help us. We rely on God in faith. The shipwrecked sailor never would have set fire to his shelter and destroyed his food supply by acting on faith. But that fire is what saved him. God blesses us in unanticipated ways. Certainly we can place our prayers before him, but sometimes the answers don't match our requests. The only prayer that never fails is that God's will be done.

### **III.**

So, back to the Gospel, what do we think Jesus intended when he told Jairus, in his grief and anxiety, to believe, which also means to have faith? And what was his purpose when he told the woman that her faith had healed her and ended her suffering?

And as we think about this Gospel reading, it's helpful to consider three aspects of faith. First, when many people speak of faith and belief today, it often is in the context of faith and belief in salvation. They think of how God acted in Jesus Christ through the crucifixion and resurrection to deliver them from the guilt and power of sin, and to show the way to eternal life.

But in the stories we heard today it meant something else. Jesus was still alive, and still was in the early part of his ministry. His death and its meaning for us was not yet part of his teachings. He had not yet talked about salvation as we understand it.

Instead, when Jesus spoke of faith and belief in today's reading, he wanted people to understand that God was acting through him to foreshadow the coming of God's kingdom. That was at the core of his earthly ministry. He wanted us to love one another in preparation for that glorious time when God's will in heaven also is done on earth.

And 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 understand God's plan for humanity, and that through him God's plan would be fulfilled. His miracles briefly opened windows to the glory of the kingdom, and gave us previews of what yet is to come.

This leads to the second point. Jesus wanted people to believe that in accepting God's love through him, they could be healed. But in asking us to have faith that we will be healed, Jesus did not promise that everyone would be cured. Those are two different ideas.

Being healed can be spiritual. Being cured is clinical. In the first case we are at peace and though God's grace are able to draw on God's strength in times of difficulty. In the second case we experience relief from medical problems and instinctively know that God is responsible. And while Jesus' miracles in the Bible often resulted in medical cures, his purpose pointed toward the spiritual healing that comes with belief.

But, even so, we still encounter miraculous medical cures in response to prayer. It happens, and we cannot explain it. Prayer is powerful, and our faith, like the woman's faith in today's reading, can result in physical changes that restore our health.

And it is not limited to health. Miracles also happen in family relationships, in the workplace, and in other areas where we interact with God's creation.

But, as I said earlier, we also know that it doesn't always happen according to our own prayers. Our faith is not an insurance policy against difficulties, and our faith does not always bring the solution we think we want for our problems.

The third point is that it is false to think that people are not cured because they do not have enough faith. And it is false to think that God wants us to learn from illness or suffering. An old saying holds that adversity builds character. There is some truth in that. But we do not experience adversity because we lack faith. God does not work that way.

### **IV.**

Creation is God's gift to us and he wants us to enjoy it. And even though humanity has misused creation, I believe that the world is getting better even though some of the stories in the media might make us think otherwise. Think about the progress humanity has made in

the two thousand years since Jesus proclaimed God's teachings in the face of a godless and oppressive Roman empire. We have come a long way. It often has been two steps forward, and one step backward, but it nevertheless has been progress.

And there still is injustice in the world, but it does not take on the global proportions that it once did when emperors and kings served themselves. Disease and hunger still exist, but not to the extent as in earlier times when it pervaded most of society except for the privileged. And evil and wickedness remain with us, but are being tempered by godly precepts that Jesus taught, even if we see them in the context of secular ethics and morality. More on this next week.

The bottom line it that the kingdom is coming. God is on the way. I believe the advances and discoveries made over the centuries that enrich our lives and give us comfort were part of God's plan. Of course, this does not mean that humanity is not responsible for gains in science medicine, literature, art, and other disciplines. But God is not confined to the church on Sunday morning. We cannot deny the presence of God's hand in all parts of our lives.

But God's work is not yet complete. In the meantime our lives will not always go as we hope. Things will not always seem fair. Jesus asks us, as he did in today's Gospel, to believe, to have faith, especially when the outlook seems bleak. He asks us to turn ourselves, our lives, and our plans over to him. Our faith will sustain us, and might even cure us. But it always will heal us. And it will enable us to rejoice in good times and be comforted in bad.

## V.

Later in the service, during communion, we will sing one of my favorite hymns. The title is "It is well with my soul," and I'm sure most of you will recognize it. The words were written in 1873 by a prominent Chicago businessman and lawyer named Horatio G. Spafford. And there is a story behind it growing from two disasters in Spafford's life

The first was the great Chicago fire of 1871, which almost ruined him financially. He had invested heavily in real estate that was destroyed and not adequately insured.

Thereafter, he, his wife, and four daughters planned to go to England to support a revival being conducted by the famous evangelist Dwight Moody, who later founded the Bible Institute of the same name.

But a business matter detained Spafford, and he sent his wife and children ahead by ship. And while crossing the Atlantic, all four of his daughters tragically died in a collision with another ship. Spafford's wife survived and sent him the now famous telegram, "Saved alone. What do I do?"

Spafford left for England to get his wife, and during the voyage the captain told him that his own ship was passing near the spot where his daughters lost their lives. Spafford sat down and wrote the words to this hymn. It is well with my soul. He later spoke of his conviction that the Holy Spirit inspired them. Remember those words during communion. It is well with my soul.

These words speak to the eternal hope that all believers have, no matter what pain or grief might befall us in our lives. They also speak to the faith that sustains us through joys and sorrows, good times and bad. And finally, they call us in faith to know that we are part of God's creation, that we belong to Jesus' flock, and that we can take comfort in knowing he will care for those who call upon his name. *Amen.*