

FRINGE BENEFITS

At first glance our scripture reading this morning may seem rather an odd choice for a Sunday when we are honoring our high school graduates. It's not about any of the things we often talk about on days like this one. It's not about realizing your dreams, or going for the gold or being all you can be. It's not about the importance of education or the value of wisdom. It's not even about looking to the future. Instead, it's two interwoven stories about a dying child and a worn down woman, and how their encounters with Jesus brought them new health and new hope.

But odd or not, there it was—plain as day. In the three year cycle of scripture readings called the lectionary; this rather strange reading was the gospel lesson for this morning.

I seriously thought about using another scripture reading. I even thumbed through the book of Proverbs, with all its wonderful passages about teaching and wisdom and the importance of remembering what you've learned from teachers and parents. There's chapter three, which begins "My child, do not forget my teaching" (1) or chapter four, "Listen children, to a father's instruction . . ." (1) and so many others.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the assigned lesson, with its strangely interwoven stories about healing, was actually perfect. Absolutely perfect.

Scholar Douglas Hare, commenting on the passage, writes: "It is difficult to see why these two stories have become entwined except that both involve females." (*Interpretation: Matthew*, 106) Yet here they are, cheek-by-jowl, side-by-side, interwoven so tightly that they are virtually inseparable.

The first is the story of a dying girl who is a daughter of privilege. Her father is the leader of the local synagogue, a lay position of great prestige and power in that ancient world. He would have had the best seat for worship. He would have been sought after for counsel and advice. His family, including his daughter, would have been looked up to by the whole village. By virtue of their position they would have been entitled to certain benefits and privileges.

The second story is about a woman who must have lived on the outermost margins of society. Matthew tells us she had been "suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years." (9:20)

That's a polite way of saying she'd been menstruating for a dozen years. Month after month, she'd dealt with a non-stop period. That, of course, would be a challenge for any woman at anytime. But in that day and age, in her culture, it made life almost unbearable. The Law of Moses was unyielding on the point: "If a woman has a flow of blood for several days outside her monthly period . . . she remains unclean for as long as the flow continues." (Leviticus 15:25) That meant she was considered unclean for twelve years. That meant that people couldn't touch her. Her husband wasn't allowed to sleep in the same bed with her. No one could sit on chairs she had sat on. She wasn't even allowed to worship in the Temple. And, perhaps worst of all, she couldn't have children. For twelve long years she had been an outcast. For twelve long years she had lived on the fringes of society.

So two stories. One about prestige and entitlement—the other about disregard and marginality.

What brings the story together, though, what they share in common, is Jesus' concern for both of them. He responds to the request of the synagogue leader, and heads out to bring healing to his daughter.—but he also stops on the way, when the fringe on his garment is touched by the hemorraging woman, and brings her healing as well. And, in the end, both the one in the position of privilege—and the one on the margins of life—are made well.

So what, as people of privilege, can we learn from these stories? And for those among us who are on the fringes, what can be learned as well?

First, Jesus made real God's care for all people. In his healing ministry he touched the rich and the poor, the privileged and the outcast. God's love and healing is available to all. Being privileged in the eyes of the world doesn't give anyone a leg up with God.

If then we are disciples of Jesus, if we are to follow in his Way, then we must be willing to reach out to all kinds of people. As we strive to live under the reign of God, as we seek to live as citizens of the kingdom of God, we must be committed to the common good.

Second, this lesson reminds us that the stories of rich and poor are entwined. The lives of the privileged and those on the fringes are connected. As long as there are the great disparities that exist today, as long as there are the very well off and those who are without the basic needs of life, we are equally in need of healing. As Brian McLaren writes: "Where the kingdom of God is, class distinctions and elitism disappears . . . the lost and excluded are covered and given a place . . . and a new inclusive equity appears." (*Everything Must Change*, 242)

Now it's no secret where most of us fit into this story.

This is a fortunate town we live in. Our average salaries here in Westport, and our average home values, are both well above national averages. Many of us hold important positions in business, government, the arts and the professions. Our high school graduates. Indeed, Staples is ranked among the one hundred best schools in the nation!

Meanwhile, down the road in Bridgeport, almost 30% of all children live in poverty; there is a 9.9% unemployment rate, and one out of five freshman drop out of underfunded schools before graduation.

Now I'm not saying all this to lay some sort of guilt trip on our graduating seniors—nor on any of the rest of us gathered here this morning. For the blame game is never helpful—and, in fact, can be very distracting. As McLaren writes: “Whether the poor blame poverty on the rich or the rich blame poverty on the poor—an economics of blame and shame is blind to the reality of systemic injustice.” (Ibid, 238)

In other words, let's stop talking about rich folks oppressing the poor. Let's stop talking about poor folks who haven't got anything because they are lazy, shiftless or whatever. Let's stop blaming individuals and instead, recognizing that an economic system that produces a city like Bridgeport just ten miles down the road from a place like Westport, isn't working well. And the only way we can fix it is by working together. From whatever position we find ourselves in.

What can our graduating seniors do? What can any of us do?

We can remember these two stories. We can remember God loves all people and calls us to do the same. We can remember that our stories are all interwoven, and ultimately, we can't be healed unless all are healed.

And as people of privilege, we can find ways to use our many gifts and powers to work for the common good. We can work to change the system itself, so that a day might come when all children can have the kind of education our children have here in Westport.

One African-American living in the inner city offered some words of advice for folks in places and positions of privilege and prestige. “What I wish, you would do something we can't easily do for ourselves. I wish you would get organized and go down to Congress and the White House and other branches of government and get them to change the laws and policies that keep . . . people so poor and our schools so ineffective. If we go in there they don't listen to us. We have no power, no clout. We don't wear thje right clothes, we don't write letters and speak with the kind of English they respect. But you could do all those things, to try and confront systemic injustice. You could use your power and privilege on our behalf. That's what I wish you would do.” (Ibid, 246)

My generation hasn't always lived up to the ideals we held out back in the sixties and early seventies when we were graduating from high school. We spoke then of equality and peace and economic justice. But it's not too late to act on those ideals.

And for those among us who are still young, there is a whole lifetime ahead in which to work for a better world, a whole lifetime to work for the common good.

I recently came across the Statement of Faith written by graduating senior Whitney Ellison three years back, when she was confirmed. It is idealistic—to say the least—yet it holds out a vision of that better world.

I can tell you about interwoven Bible stories, and God's healing love and the need to work together to create a more equitable system. But maybe Whitney's words will spur you on in a way those of a middle-aged, balding preacher can't:

"I believe," she wrote, "the world is all of God's people, together under one roof Sometimes arguments may arise, and are solved in ways God may not approve. We may be materialistic and sometimes do not follow God's wishes, but we can break that, and become one person, keeping peace and understanding God's way."

I have great hope for these young men and women, for I've already seen them working to help bring that vision to life. I've seen them on mission trips and at the Gillespie center. I've seen them helping the younger kids in the church school, and at work on Eagle Scout projects. You all understand the importance of reaching out to others, of working for the common good. My prayer for you—and for all of us—is that you, and we, keep the faith. For in the end, as Jesus told the woman on the fringes, it is that faith that will make us well. It is that faith that will make our world whole.

Amen

John H. Danner