

A SERMON PREACHED AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,

BETHANY BEACH, DE, ON

SUNDAY, JULY 8, 2018

A guy named Joe finds himself in dire trouble. His business has gone bust and he's in serious financial trouble. He's so desperate he decides to ask God for help. He begins to pray... "God, please help me. I've lost my business and if I don't get some money, I'm going to lose my house as well. Please let me win the lottery." Lottery night comes and somebody else wins it. Joe again prays... "God, please let me win the lottery! I've lost my business, my house and I'm going to lose my car as well." Lotto night comes and Joe still has no luck. Once again, he prays... "My God, why have you forsaken me?? I've lost my business, my house, and my car. My wife and children are starving. I don't often ask you for help and I have always been a good servant to you. PLEASE just let me win the lottery this one time so I can get my life back in order." Suddenly there is a blinding flash of light as the heavens open and Joe is confronted by the voice of God Himself: "Joe, meet Me halfway on this. Buy a ticket."ⁱ

Sometimes we do not hear the Word of God or understand what God has in store for us despite clear instructions. This is true in this week's gospel story, where we encounter Jesus as he returns to his home town of Nazareth and continues what he believes he should be doing, healing and preaching and teaching in the synagogue. There his own kinfolk, as well as his neighbors and acquaintances took offense at him, unable to believe that Jesus was any other than how they had known him since he had been a child. Now he was daring to teach and heal in God's name. Just who did he think he was? Was he not the carpenter's son they all knew? Did they not know his brothers and sisters? Was he not one of them? What are these supposed remarkable miracles he is performing? How can someone from this town do such things? He was a nobody; a man without a legitimate father (the "son of Mary" they call him, as a slight). Seemingly undaunted and somewhat resolute, Jesus makes the comment that a prophet is not without honor except in his own town. In other words, folks everywhere else believe in him, and he was able to do wondrous deeds throughout the countryside. But, as he notes, he is able to do very little or next to nothing amongst those who should believe in him the most. And then the gospel makes a quite incredible statement, that he could not do any miracles there, because they did not believe in him. He was amazed at their lack of faith. Wow! This has great implications for us, does it not? It appears to indicate that should we not believe in Jesus, there can be no healing. Or to put it in a positive way, those who believe in Jesus will be or can be healed by him. Those who don't - - well, it's like the guy in the joke I told earlier. God says to the man, "work with me, I can then make things happen." Healing is

synergetic: it involves the interplay of divine call and human response.ⁱⁱ If we are not in synch with God, through Jesus and the work and presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, then we cannot expect miracles. But with God, all things are possible. To prove this Jesus then sends his disciples out as healers, giving them the authority and power he lacks within his own community. And this is how to this day, through our faith in others that have been called to the healing professions, we find healers among us and our kind, even without our own group of friends and acquaintances. If this were not true, hospitals and medical offices would be sorry places.

Our own faith process - - our personal belief system - - has a lot to do with how effectively we can be healed, I believe. The theologian and preacher Bruce Epperly says it best, when he writes that “Faith opens the door to bursts of divine energy. Faith awakens us to new perceptions and an openness to divine power that enables God to be more present in our life. Unfaith can close off certain divine possibilities. While we cannot assert a linear one-to-one relationship between faith and well-being or sickness, faith makes a difference. Trust is a factor in well-being and spirituality and physical transformation. This passage begs another set of questions: How important is our faith in shaping our health and the health of others? Is faith part of a larger matrix of causes that can limit the outcomes of our prayers? Does our faith shape, positively or negatively, what God can do in our lives? Is there a partnership between our faith and the form and power of divine activity in our lives and the world?”ⁱⁱⁱ

I’d like to know the answers to all these questions, especially when it comes to how we approach God in prayer. Epperly says “We can’t control God’s power, nor can we ensure that our prayers will effect changes in body, mind, spirit, and relationships. Limitation is part of life and that includes Jesus, as well as popular televangelists who claim to heal virtually everyone who appears on their television programs.

After Jesus’ hometown encounter, he sends his disciples out on a preaching mission. He instructs them to preach and then let go of the results. They are to go forth in simplicity, without provision, trusting God to supply their needs. They must recognize that they are not in control of others’ responses. God is at work in their – and our – lives, inviting them forward in faith, but God cannot coerce belief or trust even when it is for our own good. They are not to dwell on failure or the indifference or skepticism of others, but trust God alone for the harvest. They must travel light and this means dispensing with any spiritual or emotional baggage that might stand in the way of their calling as Christ’s followers.”^{iv} That is a clue for us. We carry so much baggage based upon rumor and hearsay that we are afraid of our own personal journey with Christ and what it can mean. Surely, if we have learned nothing else in our experience as Christians there is the realization that engaging with God in the healing process can make the burden of illness so much lighter. We have all seen how people who have great faith can endure more than we or perhaps even they had ever thought of or imagined. I think of someone like Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in prison. Twenty-seven years! How does

one move on from that kind of oppression, such severe of punishments? He wrote that it was due ultimately to his faith in human nature. In his 1994 autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, he said: "No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."^v Hate and repression, rather than making him ill and taking him down a dark path where his demons lay, were overcome by an overwhelmingly conscious effort to love his enemy and to listen to all sides of an argument. He also believed in and practiced forgiveness, making a concerted effort to let go of past hurts and actions. He was always a work in progress, working hand in hand while preaching God's word of reconciliation. This was the miracle that brought him new life and saved him and kept him going till age 95! Would that we all could live a similarly reconstructed life. Yet Jesus shows us as we are sent forth from here each Sunday to, as St. Francis of Assisi suggests, preach the gospel, and use words if necessary. We probably have not understood our calling clearly. My former bishop, Richard Grein, with whom I was not in agreement with just about anything, made my ears perk up when he once preached that the church is God's greatest gift to the world. If you and I and we can see ourselves as true members of the church when we go out into the world, much around us would be changed. We don't even have to do anything - - merely be present, one to another - - and if we say that we were doing it as a member of the household of God, or if we can simply think to ourselves that this is who we are, we will change lives and bring about the healing message of the God in Christ to countless folks who are waiting for such good news and relief from their afflictions. Be present to one another. Ask yourself as the day has ended, to whom was I present? And then add up the miracles that you have created that day. There are more than one thinks. Just getting out of bed and coming together with others is a miracle of the first order. Friendship heals; speaking and listening to others does also. Sharing a meal can save the day and set one on a positive course for months on end. That is why Jesus chose to spend his last night on earth with his disciples, even one who was to betray him, because he realized the power of a meal to heal lives and to set the forces of Nature on to their proper course.

Have you ever thought of yourself as a healer? If not, it's time you did. You have within you the stuff that can bring others to wholeness. That is why community, like this one, is so important. When Bob Davis and I and others got together to do community theater through the company, Bethany Area Repertory Theater (that he and Rich Bloch co-founded years ago), we often commented on how wonderful it felt to do things with others for the sake of a good cause (raising money for scholarships for high school students wanting to pursue a career in the arts), and just to be together with like-minded folks wanting to have a good time. That's why we were so sorry to see it end because we believed we were doing something good for our neighbors and friends and for countless folks we encountered in presenting our plays. We learned just how many good things can come from the smallest of endeavors. They are memories we will cherish, for the time we spent on stage lifted the spirits of the audiences, and the participant actors and crew as well. We gave folks a safe space to be where they could imagine and experience the vision of the playwrights, expanding the horizons of each and therefore making the world a more loving and nurturing place. For "all the world's a stage," says Shakespeare in his comedy *As You Like It*. We, the players in it (or on it) have a role to play.

In the Christian world, of which we lay claim as a member, we are undoubtedly called to be healers and preachers, even though we may not identify as such. This will become critically important in the days ahead as further actions from Washington continue to divide us. Rather than adhering to the Republican or Democratic cheering sectors at the sideline, we should stand and say "I am a Disciple of Christ," and that means I believe that all are welcome at God's table. I will be the first to sit down with others, having held open the door so that all may know they have a seat before me, yet I will guard the sanctity of the seat and will fight to see that all have a place. For I put great importance in the belief that we should love our neighbors as ourselves; by this the world will become healed, by this we will become one. Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! As for me and my brothers and sisters, we await all of you and yours with open arms. We say it, we mean it, we live it. Taste and see if what we offer is good! You will not be disappointed!

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.
Pastor, BBCC

ⁱ <https://unijokes.com/joke-2675/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2018/06/the-adventurous-lectionary-the-seventh-sunday-after-pentecost-july-8-2018/>

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/nelson-mandela-and-his-faith/34956.htm>