

Lectionary 13 Fifth Sunday after Pentecost Year B 2021
June 27, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In some churches this morning, you might hear about Jesus the miracle healer, Jesus the one who heals all our sicknesses and ailments if we but say the word. Many churches preach this sort of thing, that if you just pray hard enough and you really want to be healed, then your prayers will certainly be answered. These churches will hold healing services where people with serious illnesses are surrounded by the entire congregation, and the pastor prays for healing, and the individuals are miraculously healed in that very moment. This “faith healer” brand of Christianity is so popular that it’s become the storyline of countless TV and movie dramas.

Of course, there are also several problems to this way of believing. The first is that if we don’t experience healing, we end up blaming ourselves for not being faithful enough. If only we had prayed harder, maybe God would have delivered us. This way of thinking in itself is enough to destroy a person and their faith.

But the other problem is that it leads us to an entire culture that says that we can escape death—that we don’t really have to die. In this case, it’s the idea that our faith can keep us from dying. But we might also come to believe that our possessions or our money or our reputation might be enough to save us. And this death denial may not be quite as dramatic as believing that we are completely invincible, but it leads us to believe that we’ll live a long life without suffering, and only die when we’re good and ready. It leads us to believe that our money can buy us all the healthcare that we need, that our possessions will shield us from harm, and that as long as we pray hard enough, God will keep us protected from any kind of suffering or unpleasantness.

But this isn’t what Christianity is all about, and it’s not what faith in God is about. God doesn’t provide us with a magically protective bubble to keep us safe. Our faith is not some kind of magic spell that will ward off death. Even in the case of the people that Jesus healed in our gospel reading, they’re dead now. This is the unfortunate reality of our world. All of us who live will one day die. We may hate to think about it or admit it, but this is the truth of our existence.

And it’s a truth that we know all too well. As a congregation, we’ve dealt with what seems like more than our fair share of grief over these last few years. Many loved ones in our congregation have died, and others are facing terminal illnesses now. There are times when I can feel this grief hanging in the atmosphere as we gather together on Sundays and throughout the week. This grief over the reality of death, and specifically over the deaths of our loved ones has worn us, wearied us, and changed us.

This kind of grief leads even me to hear these stories in today’s Gospel reading and think to myself, “Well, that’s nice that Jesus healed a woman and raised the dead, but why can’t stuff like that happen today? What about the people we know that need healing?” Stuck in my grief, I can fail to see the deeper messages in these healing stories.

Certainly, these stories of Jesus healing and raising the dead are meant to show Jesus’ followers the power that he holds as the Son of God. These actions are amazing and wonderful, but they serve a purpose deeper than that. Otherwise, Jesus would just walk around doing magic tricks. In fact, in one of the ancient, non-biblical gospels, the child Jesus performs tricks for his friends like commanding water to gather and flow by his word alone, and forming clay into live sparrows. But these stories of healing are more than just magic tricks to inspire awe and wonder. When Jesus offers healing for the hemorrhaging woman, and brings Jairus’ daughter back to life,

Jesus is providing the community with physical signs of God's grace and mercy. And that's something we know a bit about.

When we gather here to worship, our service is centered around the sacraments of baptism and communion. And we believe that these sacraments are also physical signs of God's grace and mercy for us. When a person is baptized, they receive the forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life. And just like in the healings that Jesus performed, these promises of God are transformed into a physical sign as the water pours over the person's head. And baptism is a sign of God's grace and mercy because we believe that it is God's free gift to us. We don't need to do anything to be worthy of baptism. God promises to love us just as we are, because God's love is unconditional.

And the same is true for communion. When we gather around the table, and when we receive the bread and wine, we are receiving a physical sign of God's grace and mercy. We proclaim that this is Christ's body and blood which are broken and shed *for you*. And we again receive a tangible promise of forgiveness, salvation and eternal life in the bread and wine. We receive these promises week after week, so that we might forever know of God's grace and mercy given to each of us.

In baptism and communion, we receive grace upon grace. God's mercy is poured over us in the waters of baptism, and God's love nourishes us every time we share in the meal of Christ's body and blood. These are the physical signs that we experience in our world today.

In these sacraments, we experience God's mercy that never comes to an end, God's mercy that is new every morning. We experience God's abundant steadfast love that gives us hope and peace. We know of God's compassion, and we are strengthened by God's Spirit.

And this becomes the basis for our faith. We have faith *not* that we can escape death, but we have faith that God's grace and mercy will carry us throughout our lives, and that at the last, we will be raised to new and eternal life.

And as we live a life of faith, the Apostle Paul gives us a vision of what this looks like. He encourages us in Second Corinthians to excel in everything, "in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in ...love," but we shall also learn to excel in generosity. He writes that where we find that we have much, we are called to share, and where we have little, we receive the generosity of others, so that God's abundance may be shared equally among all people. Through our generosity, we participate in the body of Christ, and we become a sign of God's grace and mercy for others; we become like a sacrament to others.

This life of faith, this life of generosity is how God promises to provide for us. God gives us all an abundance of gifts to share generously with one another and with the world. And as we live generously, we grow to trust more fully in God's grace and mercy and we are forever drawn back to the font and table to receive again and again the real presence of Christ our Savior who promises us forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. Thanks be to God. Amen.