

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND ELIZABETH F. KEELER

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (B)



1 July 2018

Psalm 30
2 Corinthians 8:7-15
Mark 5:21-43

My grandmother had a wonderful saying that my family often still references... “An adventure is an inconvenience properly considered.” I’ve always loved that phrase, “an inconvenience properly considered.” Life is full of both adventure and inconveniences. Some are small and commonplace – some epic and completely beyond our control.

In the Gospel stories Jesus deals in both – the ordinary and the epic. Two weeks ago I spoke about parable stories and how Jesus uses the familiar, the ordinary, to help explain important truths. Today I’d like to talk about how Jesus teaches in more epic, or extraordinary, situations.

Just last Sunday we heard the dramatic story about Jesus and his disciples being out on a lake in a raging storm. The disciples are terrified. The wind and the sea completely beyond anything they can control and meanwhile Jesus sleeps lightly in the boat. He stills the storm, of course, but leaves them with the question – “Why are you afraid, have you still no faith?” Clearly the disciples were not properly considering their adventure!

Today we hear two epic healing stories layered together. Jesus heads back across the lake when, almost immediately, a leader of the synagogue, Jairus, falls at his feet with a request. This poor man is up against an epic nightmare. It’s not a storm this time, but a threat against the life of his little girl who is close to death. Jairus begs Jesus: “Come and lay your hands on her so that she may be made well.”

Just as Jesus and the crowd set off for Jairus’ home, a woman who has been suffering for years from some sort of debilitating hemorrhaging condition manages to maneuver through the crowd and touch Jesus’ cloak. The Gospel relays her desperate thought process: “If I but touch his clothes I will be made well.” She’s immediately healed which Jesus is fully aware of and the whole scene comes to an abrupt stop as the two confront one another. The woman falls down before Jesus and he commends her belief: “Daughter, your faith as made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.”

But the insertion of this healing account only serves to increase the tension in the Jairus story, for just as Jesus turns from the healed woman, news arrives that Jairus’ daughter has died. Without hesitating, ever calm, Jesus turns to the devastated father and tells him: “Do not fear, only believe.” They proceed to house where Jesus insists the girl is just sleeping and he gently pulls her back into the land of the living and into the arms of her father.

Let’s take stock of these three epic accounts of lives being out of control with Jesus in the midst and see

what we can learn. We're usually quick to notice first off that all is made well and put to right - the storm stops, the woman is healed, the little girl gets up and walks around. Our attention is initially drawn to the resolution; Jesus fixes the inconvenient, because that's what we want to happen, we want the chaos to stop. But what else can we learn about Jesus; about the way God works in the chaotic? What might we learn about how we are called to be in the midst of circumstances that feel beyond our control?

And so in addition to Jesus making everything right we must also notice that he consistently urges those in trouble to have faith in the midst of chaos. Remember, he admonishes the disciples in the boat for their lack of faith and he praises the hemorrhaging woman for her demonstration of faith, and he tells Jairus point blank "just believe." Clearly the importance of having belief, having faith, trusting God, is critical - most especially in the epic times of our lives. Jesus makes this point each and every time before he brings resolution - faith, trust, belief is absolutely critical when we feel out of control.

Now faith is a tricky thing because often our instinct is to turn our faith into a *quid pro quo* with God. The thought process is something like this: Okay God, I believe, at least now I'm talking to you, so please deliver the resolution, stop the storm, calm the sea, heal me or someone I love. Jesus' first response to these cries, our cries, is "do not fear, only believe."

Fear or belief - apparently when human beings finally figure out that we're not as in control as we like to think we are, these are the two choices - fear or belief. We can either panic and fall overboard or ride out the storm, holding on to some sliver of belief and sanity. Now I confess to you that I've done both, as I'm sure most of you have. Sometimes succumbing to fear, other times holding on to the shreds of my faith. And in every single instance, faith always proves better. Faith, without exception, is better than fear. Fear feels like we've fallen out of the boat and are already drowning, faith feels more like watching Jesus sleep in the boat. In both cases the waves are still crashing, the illness still raging, but choosing faith somehow calms our internal chaos - even in the midst of the storm.

And so friends the lesson here is not that God works miracles upon request, but that having faith and belief in God is the better option, our only option during the inconveniences of our lives either epic or ordinary. And it turns out that all these healing and miracles stories in the Gospels are not about how we get God to do what we want. Instead they're stories about who God is and what God knows and does for us. God knows full well life is full of storms and illnesses - God knows a thing or two about that. God sent Jesus to teach and show us that in the midst of the chaos, most especially when life feels out of control, belief is better than fear and hope will always triumph over despair.

Sometimes the miracle we imagine we need does occur - and sometimes it doesn't. But the greater gift is the knowledge we'll be okay somehow either way. Not knowing exactly how, but believing just enough to know we can ride out the storm.

Amen.

(Various themes taken from "The Preaching Life" by Barbara Brown Taylor,
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