

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

June 28, 2009

Proper 8B 2009

In the name of our one living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's readings continue our examination of the nature of God and the question of power. Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures continues the story of David. The lectionary has skipped over a lot of the story so I would encourage you to pick up your Bibles this week and engage this narrative that is a meditation about human, military and political power. It is a story well worth thinking about.

In today's reading, we see David about to be presented with the crown of Israel. We have skipped over the story of David's dangerous rise to power while a king is still enthroned. The intrigue and scheming is worthy of the Kremlin, the Vatican and Washington put together! Jealous of David's successes and angered by David's popularity among the people, Saul tries several times to kill him. In today's reading we find that both Saul and his son and heir, Jonathan, have been killed in battle. David composes a song of lament for them as the way is now clear for him to assume the throne. It is worth remembering Saul's failure and David's lament as we watch his career. The story will force us to consider the use of power by humans and ask ourselves what kind of power can be trusted.

In today's gospel lesson, we examine the exercise of Divine power. It invites us to consider and meditate on the healings by Jesus of a sick woman and a young girl. The structure invites us to think about what is being said by Jesus' actions. One story is nested within another story. The stories play off against one another. What in the stories reinforce one another?

What in the stories acts against the other story?

We find Jesus and his disciples returning to the Jewish side of the lake from the Gentile side where he has healed a wild man possessed by demons. Jesus is surrounded by a large, clamoring crowd. A man, an important man in the community, the leader of the local synagogue steps out from the crowd and kneels before Jesus beseeching him to come to his home and heal his sick 12 year old daughter. This is the first scandal in the story. What is an educated privileged leader of the Jewish community doing kneeling before an uneducated itinerant preacher – especially one who is just returning from spending time with the gentiles? The onlookers would wonder about this apparent reversal of power and status.

Jesus pauses. A woman also kneeling in the crowd has reached out and touched the hem of his garment. She is alone. What respectable woman would be outside the home alone? She is poor, having spent all her money uselessly on doctors. She has been bleeding for 12 years. Not only is that debilitating, but also under Jewish law she is ritually impure and unfit to be in the community. She renders anyone who she touches or who touches her impure under the law. Religiously, she is a polluting agent, a person to be scorned and reviled for being in society.

Jesus feels power leaving him and stops, asking, “Who touched me?” The disciples seeing the situation tell him in effect, “Are you crazy? Who touched me? Look at the huge jostling crowd!” The woman, now healed, comes forward and kneels before Jesus. Jesus engages her in conversation. What’s going on here? The crowd might be a bit scandalized. Doesn’t Jesus know he has a VIP waiting for him? What’s he doing taking his time talking with this impure street person? Jesus tells her that her faith has made her well – she is no longer ill and no longer ostracized from society. Then he gives her a gift. Her calls her “Daughter” thus restoring her to a position in society – she has a community now.

As Jesus is speaking, word comes that the young daughter has died. Jesus tells the leader, “Do not fear, only believe.” Although believed to be dead with the hired mourners already

wailing, Jesus goes with the parents into her room, takes her by the hand and tells her to get up. Jesus again ignores the Law and risks touching a defiling dead body to restore her to health.

“Do not fear, only believe.” Jesus in the exercise of divine power shows that it is not coercive but relational. We have to reach out in order to receive. What drove the rabbinical leader to kneel before Jesus? What led the hemorrhaging woman to dare to reach out and touch a strange man’s garment? While the woman and the synagogue leader had vastly different positions in the society and lived in very different circumstances, each was reaching out for new life. Was it desperation or faith? I don’t know about you, but I have often touched base with my faith in my moments of most intense desperation. When I was willing to relate to God, acknowledging deep within me that God is God and I am not, God was always there reaching out to me. Maybe it didn’t solve all problems, but that relationship, that connection gave me a sense of not being alone and a sense of hope and purpose. That in itself is healing on the deepest level.

One of my most vivid memories was going to the chapel at Cabrini Hospital in New York City to pray and touch base with God when my first partner of 12 years had just been diagnosed with AIDS in 1985. Chapel was the only place I could go to at that moment. Four years later I went to that same hospital’s AIDS floor to bring communion to one of the parishioners of my parish in NJ. At the time I was general counsel of a company and one of the newly hired employees was in the same hospital. He said he didn’t want any visitors. When I found out that he, too, was on the AIDS floor, I decided to visit him regardless of his instructions.

I walked into the room. He was there with his partner. I introduced myself and saw a look of fear on his face. “O my God,” I thought, “the guy thinks I am here to fire him!” I explained that I was here to take communion to a parishioner down the hall. I put my hand on his shoulder and said that I knew about his situation because I had been here on this floor several years ago with my partner. He cried and then looked at me and said, “You’re a Christian.” I don’t think I had ever been called that before; Episcopalians aren’t real big on the touchy feely

stuff. A healing took place there. Jim did die later, but for that moment his fear and isolation died before he did. Maybe that experience had something to do with my going to seminary.

Jesus was not going to let the Levitical purity laws get in the way of responding to human need for new and fuller life. God it seems is capable of being bigger than that. The synagogue leader and the hemorrhaging woman were willing to be belittled or rebuked when they approached Jesus. Amazingly, Jesus was equally willing to be declared disobedient to the Law and religiously impure.

It seems God is also willing to take risks when we are willing to take risks in order to bring about hope, to bring about renewed and fuller life. These are not stories about how to get God to do what we want, which is really another way of staying in control. They are stories about how God is and how God uses God's power. God is there for all who reach out seeking a deeper relationship. Jesus refuses to remove himself from those who were devalued by society or declared unclean by the religious authorities of his times.

Today's readings are stories about trust and openness. Seeing the generosity and openness of God in the actions of Jesus, today's Gospel lesson calls us to trust and openness. They call us into leading lives of generosity with ourselves and with what we have. They call us to be generous with our resources and with our gifts. They call us to be fully aware and open and generous to those who come into our lives. This is what church is all about.

We may not be a mega-church, but God is not about numbers but about generosity and new and fuller life. That is what we are called to be about. That is how God's power gets exercised in the world – not through coercion and willfulness but through openness and generosity. This church is a founder of an ecumenical organization FACE of Maui that seeks to improve the housing and job needs of Maui's people and justice and humane treatment for our immigrant population. Every day of the week except Sunday, this parish opens its facilities to 12 step programs – AA, NA, Alanon and a community mental health social worker – helping people to find

hope and new and fuller lives. Every Sunday, we open our doors and give aloha and hospitality to people from all over the nation and beyond. Every Sunday afternoon and Wednesday evening we give our church sanctuary to Tongan congregation for their worship services. For 35 years, we have sponsored a pre-school for the children of Lahaina and for their hard working parents.

We may not be aware of it, but this little church has a big heart and is responding to the community with trust and openness. So fear not, but believe. New life and good things are happening here.

Amen.