

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, June 28, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Waiting for Healing

The Psalmist wrote: “*My soul waits for God.*” (Psalm 130:6). We all sang this phrase this morning as the antiphon when Alex sang the verses. What does this phrase mean to you? “*My soul waits for God.*” Does it mean that there are times in your life when God does not feel present to you? When you or a loved one is experiencing illness; or suffering from physical pain; or restricted by dementia or other mental or emotional difficulties, do you feel as though your prayers seem to go unanswered?

Theologian Martin Marty puts today’s Old Testament text into perspective on a bit of a lighter note. Marty writes: “*My spouse does not understand me. My boss never gives me any strokes. Disappointment strangles me when I try to have successes. So I come to the house of God, and am dashed to hear a lector read, a choir chant, a congregation offer responses, about having to wait for the One who is supposed to be present in God’s house and who forces me to wait, even though I am here at the scheduled time for God to be present?*”¹ Do those thoughts ever ring true for you and/or do they ring true for you today? Waiting is not something that we enjoy or appreciate. We often will go to great lengths to avoid having to wait. Today’s culture is invested intensely in immediate gratification. So, why should we bother to wait for God? Maybe the fact that the Psalmist says that it is “our soul” that is doing the waiting is a clue for our understanding. Our soul is that spiritual part of us that is most connected to God. I love the Buddhist definition of soul as “That part of us that is unborn and undying.”²

I believe our soul waits for God because we know – on a soul level – that secular culture cannot provide us with all that we need. Wealth, fame, professional success, personal possessions – all pale in comparison to our soul being in relationship to an all-loving God.

The opening verse of Psalm 130 is: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O God”. This psalm is often referred to by the Latin word for “out of the depths” which is “de profundis”. We are not told by the psalmist the exact nature of the despair that the psalmist is experiencing, but the psalms are filled with vivid descriptions of laments of “De profundis” – out of the depths. Biblical commentator, Stephen Farris, shares another perspective of verse 1. He says, “That kind of cry is actually an expression of profound faith: a faith that God is present, that God hears, and that God is able and willing to act...The psalmist cries out not so much for help as for a hearing – as if, once heard, help is certain.”³

Again, we read from Martin Marty’s commentary on Psalm 130, “*The psalm does not end as*

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).

² Lecture by Joan Halifax to Pathways’ “lifedeathafterdeath” conference in 1999.

³ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).

it began, nor does it carry on very long in the depths. Yes, the one who prays it has to “wait for God”, but the theology of “waiting” in Christian language is not a trigger for frustration. Here, as so often, it is linked with hope and promise....⁴ The psalm ends with this powerful affirmation: “For with God there is steadfast love.” (Psalm 130:7).

Turning now to our Gospel reading this week. God’s steadfast love is nowhere more evident than in our New Testament’s stories. . The miracle of Jesus’ birth; the healing miracles performed in his life; the teachings of Jesus challenging religious leaders and secular leaders; Jesus’ reaching out to those “across the sea” – those who are seen as outsiders and even the unclean; Jesus’ pronouncements about the reign of God on earth, Jesus’s commandments to love one another; and the miracle of Jesus’ resurrection from death and ascension into heaven are vivid accounts demonstrating God’s steadfast love for us.

In her commentary on today’s gospel text from Mark, Kate Matthews Huey suggests reading today’s text “between the lines”. She proclaims “crossing the sea” would have been understood in the early church as crossing back and forth from Jewish territory on one side to Gentile territory on the other. Last week we read about Jesus crossing over to Gentile territory with his disciples and encountering a life-threatening storm. While “on the other side”, Mark 5: 1 – 20 describes Jesus performing an exorcism of a man possessed by demons. You may recall that the demons enter into a great herd of swine that were then drowned in the sea. Following this miracle story we are told that “all marveled” yet they asked him to depart from their neighborhood.

Kate Matthews Huey writes further, *“And the storms and the risks were something the early Christians would have understood metaphorically as they faced challenges in their life as the church, taking the risk of opening itself and reaching out to that “other,” the Gentiles. It wasn’t an easy crossing for them, either, just as it isn’t for us, today, when we reach across the boundaries that separate us from our own versions of “the other.”⁵ Across the boundaries that separate us from our version of “the other”.*

What are the boundaries that separate us today? Clearly this week’s announcement of the Supreme Court decision in support of marriage equality and the public and political responses to that decision represent a deep separation in our nation. We are blessed in this community as an Open and Affirming Congregation to join in the justice celebrations that are being led by our denomination in General Synod on this weekend, our Open and Affirming Minnesota Conference and many other Open and Affirming local congregations in Minnesota and throughout the country. I am pleased this day to be serving as your Interim Pastor in an Open and Affirming Congregation. Whether or not there may be diverse opinions within this community on specifics of this issue, I hope that all of us can celebrate the inclusivity that this decision represents for those who have previously felt excluded; especially those who have felt exclusion from the Christian community.

In today’s gospel text from Mark, Jesus performs two healing miracles. Initially Jesus is

⁴ Ibid

⁵ http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_june_28_2015

approached by a man named Jairus who beseeches Jesus to come to his home to heal his 12 year-old daughter who is deathly ill. Jairus is Jewish leader and probably person of wealth and position in society. Jesus responds to his request by beginning to travel to Jairus' home. Along the way there is an interruption. A woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years had heard about Jesus, came up behind him in the crowd and touch his garment. This woman was an outcast even in the Jewish society due to her illness which was considered unclean. The woman is immediately aware that her hemorrhage stopped and she felt in her body that she was completely healed. Jesus also felt power had left him and needed to take time to establish a relationship with this woman. Intentionally or unintentionally, this meant that Jairus and his daughter were placed in the position of having to wait for Jesus' healing. The wait was so critical that friends of Jairus came to report that his daughter had died. This did not stop Jesus, he continued to the home. He told the family and mourners gathered there that the daughter was not dead but only asleep. They laughed at Jesus. But taking only the father and mother with him, he took her by the hand and said to her "Talitha cum", which means "Little girl, get up!" And immediately she got up.

Commentator Beverly Zink-Sawyer, says, "*Jesus' attention to the desperate needs of both petitioners portrayed in this text becomes a reminder for us of the God who is never too busy to hear our prayers and respond to our pleas in amazing and unexpected ways.*"⁶

But, remembering the psalmist's cry "de profundis" – out of the depths – what do we make of those times when God does not seem to respond to our prayers? When healing does not occur as we had prayed for? When relationships end in anger and hurt? When we experience life challenges that seem insurmountable?

In all these matters, I proclaim that God is present and hears our prayers. I proclaim that God's response is not always the response that we expect, but we can use the power God gives us to transform all these from hopelessness into hopefulness.

In my work at Pathways, particularly with persons dealing with cancer, we often talked about "the new normal" which included life with cancer. I did observe some miraculous times with persons who far outlived their prognosis, and even some who experienced unexpected remission or even a physical cure. But far more often, the persons I knew, with the support of their loved ones, with God's presence and spirit – by whatever name they called God – and using a holistic approach that taps into the power of the body's natural immune system, the power of the mind to affect the body, and the emotional and mental capacity to explore "a new normal", there was always the possibility of healing even when cure did not happen. Transformation is possible in the waiting for healing.

Finally, the message that we can take from today's texts, is that God's love is steadfast. May our faith in God be steadfast as well. Even when the results of our prayers are not what we have asked, may we remain steadfast in our faith in the goodness of love of God for all God's children on our side of the sea and across the sea. Amen.

⁶ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Proper 3-16).