

## **Homily - Taking good care of our Chariot!**

**Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt**

**June 30, 2024 – St. Barnabas Episcopal Church**

Our first reading from The Wisdom of Solomon says: “God did not make death and does not delight in the death of the living. For God created all things so that they might exist; the generative forces of the world are wholesome and there is no destructive poison in them.” From the gospel reading, we hear Jesus saying to the woman who hemorrhaged: “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.” (Mark 5:43) Today’s biblical readings focus on healing and respect for the integrity of the human body... sometimes referred to as “the temple of the Holy Spirit.” What insights are we to learn from these readings and what might the Holy Spirit be prompting us to do in response? This is the subject of today’s sermon.

The gospel reading contains two different stories, two different females, and two encounters with Jesus. One woman has been hemorrhaging for 12 years and the other appears to have died at the age of 12 years old. Both are in need of healing, both have received an incredible gift of grace, and both are given another chance to live a full life. But this is where the similarities end. The bleeding woman is without social, religious, or economic status. She is unnamed, deemed impure, and ostracized because of her discharge. The 12-year-old child has everything the bleeding woman doesn’t: a man to advocate for her, wealth, status, and position. And yet somehow, in their encounters with Jesus, both are healed.

The Gospels portray Jesus as a person of compassion, someone who saw the suffering of those around him and responded in both word and action. Jesus was an exceptional healer and generously shared his gifts of healing. He cured the blind, opened the ears of the deaf, and brought the dead back to life. As a healer par excellence, he not only responded to the physical ailments of suffering people but also to their spiritual and psychological suffering. The early Church Fathers gave him the title of “the Divine Physician.”

In the world in which Jesus inhabited, physical suffering was often blamed on the sufferer and regarded as the natural consequence of leading a sinful life. This compounded their suffering as many of these innocent people were socially excluded as in the case of the leper or the bleeding woman. Both were forced to live on the margins of society to struggle on their own. Today, this marginalization continues in our world as we punish the poor and the out-of-network folks by making access to good medical care difficult to obtain.

Biblical commentators suggest that Mark used this particular gospel story to teach his community about the power of God working through Jesus. And while we celebrate this power of God working through the ministry of Jesus, this power of God can also work through each one of us, according to the gifts we have been given. And since we

are called to follow in Jesus' footsteps, including his ministry of healing, what might that look like in concrete terms in 21<sup>st</sup> century Arroyo Grande?

The statistics on the health and wholeness of people in our country are grim, even though we are a first-world country with relatively good medical care. There are so many people today who are struggling with issues of physical, emotional, and spiritual health. For instance, 69% of adults in America are either overweight or obese which has led to an increase in diabetes as well as cardiac disease. More than one in five adults live with a mental illness. Nearly 20% of children and young people ages 3-17 in our country have a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder. Many of our students have seriously considered suicide. Mental health challenges are the leading cause of death and disability in this age group. When it comes to people's spiritual health, that too seems to be a bit 'iffy' as people lose hope, become more cynical, act in a divisive manner, and support political candidates who have lost their moral compass. And to make matters worse, there are simply not enough doctors and hospital beds today to sufficiently care for those in need. And so we pray: "Hear, O Lord, and have mercy upon [us]; O Lord, be [our] helper." (Psalm 30, vs. 11)

After a detailed reading of today's gospel story, four insights about health and wholeness stand out for me: Respect for the human body, persistence, faith, and the importance of a helping community.

**Respect for the Human Body:** Christianity is an incarnational faith, meaning that human flesh, the human body, is important to God. The God we know most intimately, is not some philosophical idea, but rather the divine word becoming incarnate in a human being who showed us the way, the truth, and the life about God. "The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, [Jesus the Christ] who has made him known. {John 1} Jesus, had great respect for the human body. In fact, he spent much of his time with healing both the sick and the suffering. And because we are his disciples, we too are called to care for the human body, not only for ourselves, but also for our fellow human beings.

I once heard the human body described as a chariot! What a wonderful insight coined by the Hindu tradition. It is a concrete image that is helpful to grasp. Our *chariot* is this body that transports us through life and carries our senses, our thoughts, our emotions, and our soul. Like any other vehicle, this chariot needs to be carefully maintained if it is to carry us through the many years of life. If not, the chariot will eventually break down or fail to move forward. Beneath these fancy robes, is a chariot which has weathered 70 years, not always treated with the respect it deserves. But now that my chariot has racked up a lot of miles, eating right, exercising daily, meditating, and getting enough sleep have become a priority. I hope the same goes for you.

**Persistence:** If you haven't noticed, navigating the health system has become quite a challenge. Trying to get a medical appointment, having to wait weeks or months before seeing a doctor, convincing medical providers to take your complaints seriously, and having the patience to work through the paperwork and billing, all require persistence. What stood out for me in today's gospel, is that the woman with the hemorrhage did not give up. Yes, she was out of network and yes, she went broke going from doctor to doctor. In fact, she grew worse in spite of her efforts. Yet against all odds, she took another chance, pushed her way through the crowds, and had an encounter with Jesus that turned out to be a success. Good for her!

It can be discouraging to get the kind of care you need. But don't give up. Sometimes you just need to be creative. Other times you need to be pushy. Steph has been trying for 3 years to get the help she needs for a medical problem. At times she has gotten discouraged. Yet, she hasn't given up because the health of her body is so important to her. I think partial healing is in her future, although it will take a few long trips to Los Angeles to get the help she needs. Persistence is the commitment to continue doing something even though it is difficult and there are significant obstacles. But when it comes to caring for your health, be persistent!

**Faith:** Faith comes from the Greek word, *pistis*, meaning trust. Faith is not an intellectual belief in a list of doctrines or believing 10 impossible things before lunchtime. Faith is rather a posture of trust in something that will ultimately save us. From a spiritual point of view, faith is a courageous trust in life, and by implication, trust in the Source of life. In more religious terms, faith is a commitment, allegiance, and attentiveness to our relationship with God. The woman with the hemorrhage and Jarius himself both trusted in the healing power of Jesus. Many of us trust in the healing power of modern medicine. Both are important for our health and wholeness. "Faith is not simply a patience that passively suffers until the storm is past. Rather it is a spirit that bears things with a blazing serene hope." (Corazon Aquino) "Faith is deliberate confidence in the character of God, whose ways you may not understand at the time." (Oswald Chamber)

**Importance of Community:** It is just too difficult to navigate this world on our own. We need one another if we are ever to attain true health and wholeness. Today's gospel is a call to roll up our sleeves and to serve one another in the ministry of healing. For those who are knowledgeable, this might mean helping others navigate the very tricky health care system and offer suggestions on where to turn. For those who have the gift of hospitality, it means providing food, rides to the doctor, or home visitation. For others, it can be as easy as listening to someone at coffee hour or being committed as a Stephen minister. For those who are politically active, it means striving for universal health care & better access to mental health treatments. For those who are generous, it means sending donations to health organizations like 'Doctors without Borders.' Because of my background in medicine and my passion for the healing

ministries, I often offer medical insights when asked, as well as preach sermons on healing. I also send specially home-crafted cards to those in need encouragement.

Steph belongs to a community of weightlifters at the local fitness center. Three times a week, she stands in line at 5:00am, looking forward to meeting her fitness buddies, many of whom keep an eye on one another and call those who have been absent. Recently, she called up one of her buddies who has significant health problems. He is still struggling with PTSD from the Vietnam War while trying to take care of his wife who has cancer of the throat. He no longer has the bandwidth to come to the gym anymore. Yet she continues to call.

Recently, he was delighted that she had taken the time to contact him. This is what he texted back: "It's a struggle for sure...Just living one day at a time and trying to build a new comfort zone. Right now we're concentrating on my wife...she twisted her knee and tore her meniscus, plus she broke a bone off which is now floating around in there...On top of that, we are having to navigate the shameful health care system of the Central Coast...it's like dealing with a roomful of special needs children. I probably won't be going back into the gym. I am having a problem with crowds and noise." Folks, there is so much suffering in our world that needs our attention. We need to persist and continue to pray in faith: "For the aged and infirm, for the widowed and orphans, and for the sick and the suffering, let us pray to the Lord. Lord, have mercy."

{Today's Prayers of the People}