**“The Healing Fellowship of Christ”**

A sermon by the Rev. Rachel Wildman

Proper 4 (Luke 7:1-10), 2016

About three weeks ago, I was on Facebook when I saw my close childhood friend, Barb’s, post about her 13 year old daughter, Molly. She was asking for prayers for Molly, who was in the ER with a headache and vomiting. This went to a parent’s worst fear—an undetected brain tumor was discovered and surgically removed, but Molly never regained brain function. Barb made tens of posts over the next 5 days asking for prayers—prayers for recovery for Molly eventually turned to prayers of strength and courage for Barb, her husband, and Molly’s sister, as they discerned whether or not to remove her from life support.

To each and every post Barb made, hundreds of people responded. Three hundred people visited Molly and her family in the hospital in the three days before they removed her from life support. Barb has commented many times on the impact these visits, and the minute-by-minute messages of support, have had on her ability to survive this most unfathomable pain.

Earlier this week, they had Molly’s memorial service—a giant theatre and dance extravaganza held in Molly’s honor—for the singer, dancer, and dreamer that Molly was. It was standing room only in the city’s theatre, which seats 1,300 people. On that day, tens of people were again on Facebook, this time expressing their gratitude and awe for an amazing show, an amazing child, and the sheer amazingness of this family’s simply breathing in and breathing out in her absence.

It was in the very moments that Molly’s show was taking place that I realized that this week’s Gospel passage is the healing of the Centurion’s slave. Apparently, I am more familiar with the version of this story that is included in Matthew’s Gospel. In Matthew’s version, the Centurion comes directly to Jesus to humbly request his healing powers, and we hear this:

*“When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, ‘Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ And to the centurion Jesus said, ‘Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.’”* *(Matt 8:10-13)*

This is what I expected to read at the very moment that Barb was weeping and gnashing her teeth in her final farewell to her Molly-Dolly. What I expected from the Gospel in that moment was an indictment of Barb’s faith…lacking, I imagined the scripture would say to me, to such a degree that her desperate pleas to God went unanswered—I expected the Gospel to communicate to me that Barb’s very real experience of outer darkness could have been avoided if she had just had a little more faith.

But, the Gospel—the Good News of Christ—that found me in that very moment was, indeed, the liberating Word of God. It was not Matthew’s version of the Centurion’s story that I encountered, but Luke’s. It was not Barb being condemned for not having sufficient faith, but Barb being caught in the gentle arms of a God who was present in the love of every single person who reached out to her.

Luke’s account of the story does not begin with the Centurion, himself, making his way to Jesus, as it does in Matthew, but with the Centurion’s community—the Jewish elders--going to Jesus on his behalf. Luke’s version does not culminate in weeping and gnashing of teeth, as Matthew’s does, but with Jesus in awe of the Centurion. The slave is healed in both versions, but in Luke’s version, there exists the possibility that it was in the context of loving relationship—both the community’s support of the Centurion, and Jesus’ being present to his own awe at the coping of one in the midst of suffering--that healing in his Name occurred.

I don’t know what I would be standing up here and saying right now if in that moment of a friend’s intense suffering I had encountered Matthew’s version. I don’t. Quite honestly, it would have been very, very hard, if not impossible, for me to experience such a passage in such a moment as the liberating Word of God.

But, I have the same permission that we seekers all have to set that aside for now and to listen, instead, to the Word of God that *did* present itself to me in that moment in which I was so present to another’s suffering.

The Word of God that I *actually* encountered that night left the glorious possibility of healing in the Name of Christ flowing from relationship, from community, from coming alongside one in great pain and allowing oneself to be moved to awe at the sheer existing that such a person is doing in that most horrifying moment.

A religious blogger I found my way to talks about a fellowship of suffering. She writes, ““There is something about suffering that longs for someone to sit with us through the pain. ***It’s the fellowship of suffering.*** It’s the words ‘you are not alone’ put into action. The sitting [bears witness](https://communicatingacrossboundariesblog.com/2013/01/09/bearing-witness/) to our pain. More than a card or a casserole, the familiar, patient presence of another says to us ‘*it’s too much for you to bear, but I will be with you, I will sit with you.'”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

It is, so unfortunately often, too much for any one of us to bear. But, the Body of Christ is corporate. It is not one person. It is a fellowship. The healing presence of Christ in the world is a fellowship. Because just as none of us can bear to suffer alone…. None of us can bear to heal alone, either.

When you next encounter suffering, I invite each of you to draw alongside one another and be present. I encourage you to join the fellowship of suffering, just as hundreds of friends and family did, and continue to do, for my friend, Barb.

Molly was not healed as the slave was healed. And that *is* too much to bear.

PAUSE

But in being met by Luke’s Gospel account rather than Matthew’s, the Good News this day is that if we who are friends, who are neighbors, who are the corporate Body of Christ make ourselves as present as Jesus was to the divinity of those who somehow continue to breathe in and breathe out in the reality of something that is too much to bear, the awe and fellowship which will result will be the very healing presence of Christ, himself.

AMEN.

1. Marilyn Gardner’s Blog, Communicating Across Boundaries ([*https://communicatingacrossboundariesblog.com/2015/09/28/stupid-phrases-for-people-in-crisis/*](https://communicatingacrossboundariesblog.com/2015/09/28/stupid-phrases-for-people-in-crisis/) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)