

The Peace of Christ

Acts 16: 9-15

John 5: 2-9

Today is Mother's Day again, but this is not exactly a Mother's Day sermon. However, I do want to start with an appropriate little story that I came across in one of my journals.

A man stopped at a shop to order some flowers [for Mother's Day] to be wired to his mother who lived 200 miles away. As he got out of his car, he noticed a young girl sitting on the curb sobbing. He asked her what was wrong, and she replied, "I wanted to buy a red rose for my mother. But I only have 75 cents and a rose costs \$2."

The man smiled and said, "Come on in with me. I'll buy you a rose." He bought the little girl her rose and ordered his own mother's flowers. As they were leaving, he offered to take the little girl home.

She said, "Yes, please! You can take me to my mother." She directed him to a cemetery, where she placed the rose on a freshly dug grave.

The man returned to the flower shop, canceled the wire order, picked up a bouquet and drove the 200 miles to his mother's house. ("How She's Made" 29)

The story is dated, of course. If it is true, surely it happened in a more innocent time. Now we see red flags all over the place, issues of safety and appropriate behavior. This kind of scene wouldn't take place in our day and age, at least not around here. Sadly, maybe not anywhere.

And yet...what can we say about this man? What happened to him in that moment, as he saw the girl lovingly place the rose on her mother's grave? What came over him?

We don't know much of anything about this man except that his mother lived 200 miles away – pretty far. It sounds like he was a practical

sort. Mother's Day...he would send her flowers...put a check in the 'loving son' box.

But the experience with the girl at her mother's grave utterly transformed him. Suddenly he knew that sending flowers was not enough; he had to be there... with his mother... in person, for his mother was alive. He had to be open to the moment; he had to seize this opportunity. And so, he was immediately moved to change his mind and do something very different from the gesture he had planned. And in making that decision, could it be that a **sense of rightness** came upon him, that is, a sense of knowing what the right thing is to do and doing it?

Was the Holy Spirit at work? I think so.

Passages of Holy Scripture always take us back to an earlier time, and sometimes we have trouble translating what the Bible says so that it makes sense for us now. And yet...what can we say about the characters we have met in the scripture readings today? Something happens to them too. They are lifted out of very practical situations and transformed. They are open to the moment; they seize an opportunity.

The man at the pool. We are told exactly about the place: it is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate; it is called Bethzatha and it has five porticoes. The King James Version tells us that at certain seasons of the year, the water in this pool is stirred up by an angel and when that happens, those who go into the water are healed from whatever they suffer from. The man in the story had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. He tells Jesus what happens to him, year after year: no one will help him into the pool; others just step over him.

Jesus simply says to him, “*Stand up, take your mat and walk.*” He does. And *at once the man was made well...* He is open to the moment; he seizes the opportunity. He was immediately moved to obey this Jesus and to do something totally different than he had done or been able to do before. And in being obedient, he was transformed. **He was healed.**

Jesus was at work. We know.

Then Lydia.

Again, we are struck by the practicalities. Paul, like the gospel writer John, is very specific about place. *We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony.* They go down to the river where women have gathered to pray. There they meet Lydia and we are told facts about her as well: that she was a worshiper of God, she was from the city of Thyatira and she was a dealer in purple cloth.

Knowing all this about her, we know other things as well. And she is very different from the man at the Bethzatha pool. Being a dealer in purple cloth – fabric for the rich and powerful in the empire – Lydia is quite well off herself. She is also astute; she manages her household alone (no husband is mentioned) and runs a successful business.

Lydia is also a worshiper of God, which means she has set aside the multiplicity of Roman gods in favor of the one God of the Jews. And she has no doubt heard of this apostle Paul and of the stories he tells about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the meaning of those stories. Word gets around.

Now Lydia hears Paul for herself. And what has seemed reasonable to her – this smart, sharp woman – now touches her heart as well as her

mind. Eagerly she listens and then decisively acts. With no hesitation she is converted and baptized. She has been transformed. With urgency she responds to the new call upon her: *“If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.”* Lydia has found a **sense of completeness and purpose** in her life. Her social standing, business acumen and financial well-being are not sufficient. Jesus Christ has come into her heart and into her home and she does not want him to leave. And he won’t.

The Holy Spirit is at work, you know.

These three stories from time past have some factors in common.

- The Holy Spirit is at work transforming individuals.
- The individuals are open to the moment, deciding to seize an opportunity to follow the Spirit.
- **The result of this decision is a healing of brokenness, a sense of rightness, and a feeling of completeness. That is, the peace of Christ abides in them now and promises never to leave, even in times of trouble.** “My peace I give to you,” Jesus says in the Gospel of John. “My peace I leave with you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.”
- Filled with the peace of Christ, they move on in life with new purpose. The man drives 200 miles to see his mother on Mother’s Day and probably will do that from now on. The invalid picks up his mat and walks and later proclaims that it was Jesus who healed him. Lydia’s home becomes a meeting place for a new Christian congregation and she herself a leader.

Some things do not change over time. The Holy Spirit is still at work transforming individuals, healing, directing. And people still have to be open to those moments and decide to follow the Spirit's leading. And the peace of Christ, which we exchange with one another every Sunday, still can abide with us and support us in our living, in times of harmony and in days of trouble.

The church keeps searching for new ways to make the message of Jesus Christ relevant for today. How do we reach younger people, whose sensibilities are different? Music in worship is a key target for change. Contemporary praise songs; words flashed on a screen in Power Point; rock band accompaniment. The church cannot be deaf and blind to what the Holy Spirit may be doing. For we know that the Holy Spirit is still at work, transforming individuals.

And yet...as I lived with these scripture passages this week, it was the tune and the words to an old Methodist hymn that played in my head, its poetry pointing to the peace that only Christ offers. Listen...

Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea;
Day by day his sweet voice soundeth, saying, "Christian, follow me!"

Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store,
From each idol that would keep us, saying, "Christian, love me more!"

Jesus calls us! By thy mercies, Savior, may we hear thy call,
Give our hearts to thine obedience, serve and love thee best of all.

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