

Sermon
St. Mary's Nanoose
August 21, 2016.
Luke 13:10-17

A young woman has important job interview. In order to arrive relaxed and poised, she leaves home early. Well on her way to the appointment the traffic suddenly slows and grinds to a halt. Then for what seems like hours, the traffic crawls along. She finally arrives but there isn't a parking space in sight. Circling the block for the 3rd time, she becomes frantic. She begins praying: "Lord, please help me find a parking spot. Please, please help me. I promise I'll quit swearing and using your name in vain. I'll even phone my parents tonight." Circling the block for the 4th time she prayed in desperation, "Lord, if you get me a parking spot, I'll even come back to church and....," Just then, someone pulled out from the curb right in front of the office door. "Oh, never mind, Lord, I found one myself!..."

Does a tree that falls in a forest makes a sound when there's no one there to hear it?

What is a miracle? Just because we don't witness, acknowledge or accept a miracle, does it mean it didn't happen?

In this morning's reading from Luke, we hear the story of a woman, crippled for over 18 years, being healed by Jesus on the Sabbath, in the synagogue. So we know that the healing takes place on a holy day in a holy place. The leader of the synagogue, the person who might know something about holy matters, objects and is

indignant when Jesus does what is forbidden by religious law. No work is to be done on the Sabbath; including, it seems, curing a person.

It would be easy to ridicule the leader but we must take into account the historical context of this story. Within recent memory, the Jews had seen their world collapse. Five hundred years before, Jerusalem had been conquered by the Babylonians and the temple had been destroyed. And, as was the custom of the day, the conquered elite and skilled craftspeople were sent into exile, to Babylon. This ensured that the power structures of Jerusalem were destabilized and the workforce of the Babylonian enhanced. For the Jews of that time, Yahweh's home was in the Temple of Jerusalem. So the destruction of that temple and being sent into exile meant the loss of their God which was the worst thing imaginable. The only way the Jews could make sense of this was to understand that they were being punished. They had not obeyed the law; they had not listened to the warnings of the prophets, and God was angry with them.

So when the Jews were permitted to return to Jerusalem a couple of generations later, many became rigorous in their obedience to the law. They didn't want to risk angering their God again. They were yearning for the Messiah to come and free them from their current oppressors – the Romans - and they weren't going to mess up their chances.

So jump forward to the time of Jesus. He was traveling around and being invited him into the synagogues to teach. Was it a

coincidence that a woman, bent over in pain for years and years, showed up on this particular Sabbath in this particular synagogue?

Jesus was all eyes and ears; he sees the woman enter and he is moved to respond. Did he simply stop talking mid sentence? Or did he finish his teaching? In either event, he notices the woman and calls her to come over to him.

He heals her. How does he heal her? With words and touch. He lays his hands on her and proclaims her “set free from her ailment.” And then.... *she praises God*. This is key because the writer of Luke wants us to see that the healing is attributed to *God*. Luke wants to emphasize that it is God, not Jesus, at the centre of this event. Jesus is pointing to the God and God’s desire is to move the people beyond the law and into the realm of compassion. Jesus calls the people in the Synagogue out – “Surely,” he says, “if you have compassion for the animals in your care, you would care about the well being of a fellow human being.... even on the Sabbath.” In this way Jesus acts and is acted upon like a sacrament, the healing he performs directs us to the presence and action of God in our lives.

I invite you to put yourself into this scene, watching the whole event unfold, what would be your reaction? Would you feel challenged that all you held to be right, proper and true was being turned upside down in your sight? Would you worry that God was being offended?

Would it be like a visiting priest coming to St. Mary’s doing something unexpected in the middle of the liturgy. Would you say,

“That’s not how we do things here!” or would you be open to wonder “Wow, what is going on here? How might God be speaking through this person?” This kind of discernment is challenging to us. It’s easy in retrospect to understand who Jesus was and what he was doing, but for the people of his day, it was confusing, disturbing and exciting, all at once.

The whole of Jesus’ mission is wrapped up here in his response to the people in the synagogue that day. His is a call to freedom. A freedom that we can find in and through our tradition. We don’t have to ditch the rules and regulations; we’re just called to go *deeper*. Beyond the rules, the law, the outward expression of religion into the heart of it. After all, that’s what our liturgy is all about – pointing us towards something that’s deeper than words, deeper than definitions or creeds, to that inexplicable Presence that lives deep within us - creating, loving and sustaining us. Calling us to new life. A life we have difficulty imagining yet a life we long for.

Remember - Jesus was thoroughly Jewish. He was fully educated and rooted in his own religious tradition. And securely from that place, he called, and continues to call, people to a deeper understanding of God’s movement and intention in life.

A miracle. How often does God speak to us through miracles and we ignore, don’t notice, or downplay them?

Like Abraham and Sarah we laugh at the idea that God can create. We try and set the conditions and God busts them all the time. God has created everything. Out of nothing. The seen out of the

unseen. The child out of sperm and an egg and that 'something else' that vitalizes their union. God paints a sunset full of shades of gold, orange and red in a formerly blue sky. A bird defies gravity and sings a song no other bird can. God heals unexpectedly and takes away unexpectedly. We see people fall in love and be transformed by love. And we can become complacent. Our eyes become dull. We pay attention to the news, instead of the Good News. Our vision becomes distorted; we worry, we fear. We are no better, no worse than the disciples of Jesus' day. We have the similar challenges; just a different, very different setting.

Like the disciples of Jesus' day, we are asked to believe; to have faith. To be open to how God is working in our lives and in the church. Just as we can't predict how our own lives will unfold; we are just as limited when we look at the church. We can't know how it will grow, die or change. Remember, God is not confined to the church. The Jews of Jesus' day had learned that when they discovered, with relief, that God had *gone with them* into exile.

As in every age, as followers of Jesus, we are called to keep our eyes and ears open, to be aware of who comes in through the doors of our homes, our hearts, and our church buildings, looking for support, hope, encouragement. In turn, we need to be alert to our own need for healing and ask for God's help with that, becoming aware again of who arrives to support us.

We need to relax a bit. And trust a lot. Can we let God lead us into the new world God is creating? Can we see all the ways Love is

moving in the world? Can we wake up and give thanks for the miracles in our own lives? Do we truly see people who love us, the beauty of the world around us, the simple pleasures that make up our days?

There are plenty enough people in the world who complain, who are cynical, who are defeated.

Can we offer a counter-balance? Not because we have all the answers, but because in our deepening relationship with God and in our liturgy we are practiced in noticing, in wondering, in giving thanks?

I think of my great aunt who lived in Indonesia during the Japanese occupation of WWII. Her husband was taken away and she struggled to keep her family alive. It was a brutal time. My aunt kept a journal, and although it was written in Dutch, my father told me that it was a record of the simple pleasures of her day.... The flowers that grew between the food she cultivated in order to feed her family, the kindness of a neighbour, the relief of the rain, and other such things. He told me, "You would never know she was living during a time of great fear and deprivation." Her writing was full of gratitude.

Perhaps this is what we called to do. Live full lives. Live grateful lives. Live lives of trust. And if others wonder about our faith and joy, we can invite them to experience our Sunday worship. Not because we need to convert them, but because we're people who alert to the miracles God performs everyday, and we want to share that joy with others.

Last Thursday, I led the Parish Council in a Visioning Session. I've thought a lot about what transpired that afternoon. I did get some feedback at the end of the afternoon, kind feedback, but I don't really know what it was like for council members. What I do know is what it was like for me. I talked a lot. More than I would have liked to. I didn't listen as much as I wished I had. Why? Because I wasn't trusting. I felt the weight of "making this church work" on my shoulders. In the days since Thursday, I've realized that this church, this community is working very well, thank you very much. This community is vibrant and vital and things are going well. That I enjoy being here at St. Mary's and that other people seem to as well. And isn't *that* a miracle! Of course we have work to do. That's life. That's how we grow, by working together. So the Spirit is alive and well here at St. Mary's. And I give thanks for that. And I look forward to how God is leading us to new life; in ways we couldn't ask or imagine.

What a miracle it is that I landed up here with you. Unlike the young woman in the story I told at the beginning of the sermon who was looking for the parking spot, I know I didn't get here on my own accord. And for that, I give thanks to God.

Amen.