



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: March 8, 2009

A Simple Act of Faith, Robert B. Culp

2 Kings 5:1-14; Mark 1:40-45

There are lots of phrases in the English language we would prefer not to hear. “The tests have come back, and it’s not good news.” “We have to downsize, and we’re going to eliminate your position.” “I’m sorry, nothing can be done.” There are probably no more terrible words than those last words I’ve shared. For they mark the end of labor, the end of possibility, the end of hope.

Through the years in my ministry, I’ve been present more than a few times when family members have heard such words as these. A family is holding vigil in the surgical waiting room. The out-of-date magazines on the table have all been read, and reread. The wall clock seems to be moving in slow motion, and the family is waiting. A dark spot on an x-ray had demanded attention. “We just don’t know,” the surgeon had said. “We’ll have to go in and check.” And now the surgeon comes through the door, wearing a loosened surgical mask around his neck, and his face is lined with concern. “I’m sorry,” he begins, “there’s nothing we can do.”

Or a woman sits before a desk in a glass cubicle in the corner of a large room full of similar desks. She has spent the entire day in front of these desks, being passed from one clerk to the next. She has been ignored and condescended to, but she has been persistent, and now she is speaking earnestly to the department head in charge of county social services. Her husband is dead, she tells him. She lost her job some time ago in a layoff at the plant, her bills are long overdue, and now the sheriff’s deputy has delivered a foreclosure notice on her small house. The man thumbs through her file, picks up his phone, and he speaks softly to someone at the other end. Cradling the receiver, he knits his fingers together and says, “I’m sorry. Nothing can be done.”

As I said, there are probably no more terrible words than these. Because until they are spoken, there may be pain and suffering and anxiety, but there is always hope. Even when the struggle is being mounted against overwhelming odds, there is at least the dignity of doing something, anything, about one’s circumstances. But somehow, “nothing can be done” ends the meaningfulness of the struggle and destroys what remains of dignity. As Dante imagined over the final portal of hell, “All hope abandon, ye who enter here.”

Well, to be a leper in New Testament times was to live constantly under that motto, “Nothing can be done.” The disease transformed its victims into loathsome, disfigured creatures, shunned by everyone. It was hopelessly incurable, and even the person’s own body seemed to turn on itself. The author Philip Yancey reports that modern-day visitors to leper colonies in rural villages in Africa and Asia have seen the sufferers of this disease reach into pots of boiling water in order to recover the vegetables cooking there. They feel no pain at all, even though the scalding water raises blisters on the flesh and destroys tissue. Even the body’s pain system, which normally warns of danger, shuts down because of this dreaded disease.

So, make no mistake about it: when Jesus encountered a leper that day in Galilee, he was face to face with the most hopeless and untouchable of all people. Physically disgusting, unwelcome at worship, the leper was also beyond the care even of the Torah. One scholar writes, “The law could do nothing for the leper; it could only protect the rest of the community against him.” So the community of God’s faithful had to ring its hands and say: “I’m sorry. Nothing can be done.”

All of which makes what the leper said to Jesus absolutely astonishing. “If you will,” he said, “you can make me clean.” You see, quite often faith begins at the outer limits of human resources. That may be why we American Christians often find our faith weak and our religious expression trivial when contrasted with the vibrant discipleship of Christians around the world who live in places of persecution. Where there are still plots to be hatched, angles to be pursued, human stratagems to be tried, faith struggles to survive.

The leper, though, was cut out of all the plots. The leper had no angles, possessed no stratagems. All the leper had was leprosy ... as well as that damning verdict ringing in his ears, “I’m sorry. Nothing can be done.” Here at the boundary of human hope, one’s choices are narrowed to two: Be resigned to your fate, or reach toward the mystery of grace beyond all hoping. In this case, the jury was in. Everyone had testified against the leper: family, respected members of the community, even his ministers. And the verdict rendered was that of ostracism and isolation. But the leper refused to accept the verdict of fate. In hope, he reached beyond himself, reaching out toward the mystery of grace that he discerned in this man Jesus. And his was an amazing profession of faith: “If you will, you can make me clean.”

At the cold and forlorn memorial which was once the Dachau death camp, there are signs all around of that time when hatred filled and threatened to rule the world. There are the rough barracks where Jews and the other prisoners were cruelly housed. There are whips and other instruments of torture in a museum, and there are, of course, the gas chambers and the ovens. But there is also something else.

At one end of the camp, there stand three chapels – one Protestant, one Roman Catholic, and one Jewish. At the opposite end of the camp is a monument which reads, “Never again.” Of course, there is nothing in human history which warrants that statement. Humanity has manifested uncontrolled evil before, and even now there are places where the savagery present at Dachau is still at work. If the chapels and the monument point only to the potential for goodness in the human heart, then they are truly mocked by history. The monument should read, “We’re sorry. Nothing can be done.” But, of course, these symbols point beyond the tragic circumstances of human evil. For they express a hope beyond all normal human hoping, a hope that there is at work in the world a power which will finally topple evil from its seemingly invincible throne.

In Tillie Olsen’s moving story “I Stand Here Ironing,” she pictures an anxious and impoverished mother standing at the ironing board and thinking about her troubled teenage daughter, Emily. A note has come from the school asking her to come in to discuss Emily’s problems, and this starts her mother remembering Emily’s childhood.

Emily was a beautiful baby, a miracle, remembers her mother. But when she was eight months old, her father abandoned the family, and Emily had to be left during the day with a woman downstairs “to whom she was no miracle at all.” Then, as economic hardships increased, Emily was left in the kind of nursery school, which is only a parking place for children. Her mother did not know then the pain that was in that place for Emily, but as she irons and reflects, she admits that knowledge could not have made a difference. She had to hold a job, and the nursery school was the only place for Emily.

Emily was a thin girl, and she was a dark and foreign looking in a time when little girls were supposed to be blonde and plump and cute. She was a slow learner in a world where quickness and glibness were valued. She

was a child, not of proud love, but anxious love. And now, a note has come from school, but Emily's mother knows that too much has happened to Emily for there to be any real help for her at that school.

As she moves the iron back and forth across the ironing board, thinking about the isolation and poverty and rejection that have been Emily's inheritance, she cries to herself, and to whatever power of mercy there may be beyond herself. Olson writes, "She has much to her, and probably little will come of it. Let her be ... Only help her to know – help make it so there is cause for her to know – that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron."

Emily is a modern-day leper, one about whom her culture has sadly shaken its head and said, "I'm sorry. The die has been cast. The scars are too deep. Nothing can be done." And yet, in her mother's desperate cry there is hope beyond all hoping, there is an appeal to the last resort of grace. "Help her to know," she prays, "that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless ..." You see, it's an appeal that has been heard again and again where faithful souls ... whether kings or lepers, ancient pilgrims or those fresh on the journey of faith ... pray for loved ones and themselves in need of healing and hope, and humbly reach out beyond themselves to be touched by the Lord of Life.

"If you will," said the leper to Jesus, "you can heal me." And Jesus was moved with strong compassion. The one who was, and is, and ever will be "the help of the helpless" was deeply moved. And stretching out his grace-filled hand, he touched the untouchable leper. "I will," he said. "Be clean." And within the blinking of an eye, that sad, condemning, "nothing can be done" pronouncement was abolished by Jesus' merciful response, "I will."

The essayist Loren Eiseley once spent some time on the coast of Costabel. In the dark hours before morning, the beaches there are littered with the barely living debris of creatures thrown onto the sand by the passionless tides. Flashlights and lanterns bob along the beach as shell and starfish collectors greedily seize what the sea has given them.

One night, Eiseley noticed a lone figure on the beach stooping to pick up some object and then flinging it far out into the sea. Eiseley went over to this man and discovered that what he'd thrown was a starfish, still alive.

"It may live," the man said, "if the offshore waters pull strong enough. The stars throw well. And one can help them." As Eiseley left the man, he saw him toss another starfish back into the sea. Viewing this experience as a parable, Eiseley wrote, "Somewhere, my thought persisted, there is a hurler of stars, and he walks, because he chooses, always in desolation, but never in defeat."

"If you will," said the desolate and hopeless leper, "you can make me clean."

"I will," said Jesus. And stretching out his hand, Jesus grasped the leper with tender mercy and flung him far out into the deep and healing waters of the sea of grace.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, in the face of such scriptural stories and wondrous truths you place before us this day, help us humbly and attentively listen to those who are powerless and are hurting within our world, that we may hear their cry and respond to their tender needs, so that together we may all be restored to health and wholeness, in Jesus' name. Amen.