

Second Sunday after Pentecost

June 11, 2023

Faith, Okemos

Hosea 5:15-6:6, Psalm 50:7-15, Romans 4:13-35. Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Grace to you and peace...

It was Friday morning. Lola lay in her bed at Independence Village in Grand Ledge crying out, "Help me! Help me! Help me!" Lola, now in her mid-90's, is dying.

Author Anne Lamott has written, "Here are the two best prayers I know: 'Help me, help me, help me' and 'Thank you, thank you, thank you.'"

When I read the scriptures to Lola like the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and Psalm 46 and Matthew 11 in which Jesus says, "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest..." she both haltingly and forcefully said them with me, totally by memory. I don't know that I've ever heard those passages spoken more powerfully.

Then seemingly out of the blue she began to speak the words of an old hymn, "I Need Thee Every Hour."

*I need Thee every hour  
Most gracious Lord  
No tender voice like Thine  
Can peace afford.*

*I need Thee, O I need Thee  
Every hour I need Thee  
O bless me now, my Savior  
I come to Thee.*

That was the beginning of our little concert together which also included "What A Friend We Have in Jesus." In the midst of this, Bruce, one of Lola's children arrived, together with a granddaughter Jennifer, her husband Tom, and their little son. Amidst abundant tears and hugs, a trio was formed, Jennifer joining Lola and me in "Jesus Loves Me" and "You are My Sunshine." Then with hands joined we prayed the Lord's Prayer.

Over and over, Lola said, "Thank You." She said that to us, but I thought in my heart that in those moments we got to be Jesus for her and with her.

I think both Anne Lamott and Lola capture the essence of prayer. It is "help me" and "thank you."

Five years ago I was with my sister, Jean, when she died. We were together in the ICU in Cleveland Clinic much of the last two weeks of her life. I know we both talked a lot and were silent a lot. We prayed together. But in hindsight I wished I'd have thought to sing with her. Jean had a beautiful voice and was an accomplished pianist and organist. I just didn't think of doing that.

Mindful of that regret again, I returned to visit Lola Friday afternoon with an old Service Book and Hymnal. We sang hymns 'til I sensed that maybe now this was more for me than for Lola. Amidst a coughing spell she said "this has been so fun" ...and we sang one more hymn. I asked if she was ready to sleep. And after quiet prayers for help and words of gratitude, she closed her eyes in sleep.

Afterward, I thought about Lola and her family and about the gospel reading for today. I think Lola's repeated cry for help was also the cry in the hearts of the hated tax collectors who collected money for the Roman Empire and often kept more than was legal for themselves. I think her cry for help was in the hearts of the morally despicable, the sinners, who together with the tax collectors sat with Jesus and his disciples for dinner at Matthew's home. Unlike the Pharisees, a spiritually elite group living always on the edge of self-righteousness (They may have often thought and sometimes said "We are the good, law-bidding people")...Unlike the Pharisees the tax collectors and sinners they knew they were corrupt and immoral. But as Anne Lamott also writes, with God there are sometimes experiences beyond the fervent, anguished need for help and sometimes another experiences beyond our expressions of thanksgiving for the grace Jesus so freely gives. Anne calls those experiences moments of "wow." My "wow" on Friday was when Lola kept amazing me with her vivid memory. When I told Lola how amazing she was, she quietly responded, "Well, not that good." But for me it was a 'wow.'

"Wow" must have been felt in the hearts and minds of those dining with Jesus at Matthew's home...wonderful, liberating feelings and thoughts like "With him we are not despised. We are not being judged. We are not excluded but fully accepted. Wow, this is wonderful. This must be what true love looks like. This is a mercy we never experienced before." [I could imagine Matthew now posting on his door in Aramaic the words on the banner we dedicated this morning: All Are Welcome!]

Clearly the cry for help was in the heart of the rabbi of a local synagogue who came to Jesus, knelt before him and said, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her and she will live." The text continues: "And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples."

For both the rabbi and Lola, their cries were cries of faith. As St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, it is the cry of faith, however anguished, this precious gift and promise of God given to people like Abraham who at 100 years of age, as good as dead, believed that God would enable him and Sarah to have a son, that Abraham would truly be "the

father of many nations.” This gift of faith that God could still do this, all the evidence to the contrary, was expressed by Lola when she uttered the words of a hymn she probably learned 80 or more years ago: “I need thee every hour most gracious Lord. No tender voice like thine can peace afford.” This was her faith in the grace and mercy of her Lord.

And then there was the longsuffering woman in Matthew’s story of Jesus:

*Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind [Jesus] and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” Jesus turned, and seeing her, he said, “Take heart, daughter, your faith had made you well.” And instantly the woman was made well.*

Surely her flow of blood made her “unclean” as indicated in the very words of scripture (Leviticus 15:19). She would have been very much alone, not welcomed, not loved by virtually anyone. But God loved her and God placed in her desolate heart the faith that by merely touching the fringe of Jesus’ cloak, she would be made well. (Notice her respect for Jesus, touching his cloak, not his skin, lest, according to the law, he be made unclean.) Her unspoken cry for help, borne of the gift of faith, was met with mercy. She was made well. The instantaneous nature of her healing was surely a “wow” moment in her life and perhaps for those who witnessed this power of God’s love.

This past Wednesday I presided at a graveside service which followed a heart attack and the resulting death of Bryan, a son whose much beloved mother had died just over a week before his own death. Needless to say, his family and caregivers who supported Bryan in his lifelong journey with cerebral palsy were devastated. Yet in the scriptures read at this service, we were all reminded of God’s promise given to him in Holy Baptism, reminded that God was and would be with him always, that Bryan would suffer always with Jesus, die always with Jesus, and always rise to new life with Jesus. His sister, Susan, his devoted brother-in-law, John, and Bryan’s nephew, Nathan, all spoke eloquently of his compassion, his empathy, his tenderness, his sensitivity as expressions of God’s mercy and grace in Bryan’s life. John, a jazz musician, asked me if he could play a recording of “Downtown”, one of Bryan’s favorite songs, at the conclusion of the service. As I prepared for the service, I had wondered, in vain, how I might include that song in my sermon, but now I said “yes” to John. As we listened and then one by one joined in singing “downtown”, I thought in a new way about what heaven would be like with words like “The light’s so much brighter there. You can forget all your troubles, forget all your cares... Things will be great when you’re downtown. No finer place for sure Downtown. Everything’s waiting for you downtown, downtown.” Yes, it was a bit of a stretch, but for us it was a “wow” moment, God lifting our spirits in a day of sadness as together we had shoveled earth over the urn of Bryan’s ashes, lifting us through a very secular song, now for us a song portraying a new way of thinking about heaven, about what the “downtown new Jerusalem” will be like for Bryan...and for us.

Following the story about a lonely woman, so long ill, now healed, now no longer needing to be alone, we hear these bold and strong but also immensely comforting words; *When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion. He said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up.*

Though he was probably wealthy and highly respected, this little girl's father humbled himself before Jesus. He recognized that he had no power of his own, no amount of money, no noble reputation powerful enough to bring his daughter back to life. But as with Lola and with Bryan's loved ones, he humbled himself and believed that if Jesus could come, would come, his sorrow would yield to joy. He believed that by Jesus' hand in his daughter's hand, she would live. And Jesus did come and Jesus did take her by the hand and she got up.

So for Bryan who sleeps now, so soon also for Lola, what Jesus, the Son of God, has done, living as one of us, suffering and dying and rising for them and for all of us, when we sleep, even in death as earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, when Jesus takes our hand, we will live.

One more hymn Lola knew by heart (though not with exactly the version I'm reading now):

Lord, take thou my hand and lead me  
Unto the end;  
In life and death I need thee,  
O blessed Friend;  
I cannot live without thee  
For one brief day;  
Lord, be thou ever near me,  
And lead the way.

Lord, grant us, like the despised tax collectors and sinners, like the chronically ill woman, like the distraught father whose daughter had died, grant us the faith to receive your steadfast love, your amazing grace, and your boundless mercy for us and for all members of the human family.

Amen.

JDS