

Holy Work

Preparing sermons is a curious business; it is far more mysterious (or perhaps mystical) than most listeners understand or expect. I do not sit down on Tuesday morning and decide what I am going to talk about on the following Sunday. I read and study and talk during the week, so that by the weekend, it will be reasonably clear what the text may be saying to us. The patterns are sometimes startling, sometimes subtle, and sometimes (like this morning) linked together in ways that weren't consciously planned.

The pattern I am talking about is the essential link between prophetic ministries and pastoral ministries. By *prophetic* ministries I mean that work that calls us to speak the truth about the world around us, even when that truth is counter-cultural and disturbing. And by *pastoral* ministries I mean that work that calls us into compassionate and supportive relationships with those who are victims of illness, injury, and injustice.

Two weeks ago our Faith Partners group insistently led us to uncomfortable truth about alcoholism and other addictions. They provided information, resources, and personal stories that opened our eyes to the complicated web of life disturbances that come along with addictive disorders. Their prophetic work moved them – and now has moved all of us – to more faithful actions and programs on behalf of those who are afflicted and those who are affected by these problems. And perhaps most sobering of all, we learned that as part of the Body of Christ, all of us are affected by them.

Last week, though the topic was very different, the message was curiously the same. Our "Green" task force brought us stories, information, and resources about the need to care more passionately and actively for the earth and all its inhabitants. We were introduced to collaborators who invited us into a whole variety of new habits and practices. The prophetic words about climate change and habitat degradation called us, almost literally, into new ways of loving and serving the earth and the creator who handed into our care.

This week we are honored to celebrate and support ministries in our community which show this same fundamental connection between prophetic vision that is faithful and clear on the one hand, and human service that is just and kind on the other. We are, in fact, blessed to have these agencies working in our community.

But our celebration, support, and blessing must not hide the difficult truth, the prophetic truth, that these private agencies exist precisely because we have otherwise failed to meet the needs they address in our common, civic, public life. The reason we need a program of permanent supportive housing is that our governmental agencies and health care providers have not invested in the facilities and resources that are needed to provide safe, comfortable, respectful, and supportive homes for those who cannot

manage that by themselves. The reason we need Healthfinders is that our public policy tolerates a disturbing amount of human suffering to maintain an economic system in which health care is primarily linked to employment of a particular kind – a kind not available to an increasing (and alarming) proportion of workers.

Given all of that, the story we heard from the book of Acts this morning seems quaintly simple and straightforward. Peter was called to the bedside of a woman who had just died, and with prayer and the calling of her name he brought her back to life. But simple as the story is, it brings us an important reminder this morning: that both the prophetic word and the compassionate act are grounded in faith. Peter did not rely upon his own wisdom or power or knowledge to heal Dorcas. He did not convene a task force or commission an in-depth study. He did not even allow her friends to stay in the room. Instead of all that, he prayed. He opened himself, as he had no doubt done many times, to a connection with God. Only then was he able to work a miracle.

We are inclined to think that the work of prophetic speech and compassionate action depends entirely on us: on our energy, our fund-raising, our managing, our time. And in truth, all of those things are important. But what really makes it possible for us to sustain our prophetic and charitable activities over time is the confession that we cannot do it by ourselves; that we depend upon divine guidance, divine inspiration, and divine provision of companions along the way.

Today, we are among those companions, and we are surrounded by a great cloud of witness. In this sanctuary, we are in the presence of thousands of faithful people, who have worshipped here, prayed and sung here, and left on Sunday mornings ready to take on the challenges of prophetic speech and compassionate acts. We are proud to be their descendents, and humbled to be invited to walk with them in the mission and ministry of this congregation.

Amen.

Prayer for April 29, 2007

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

God of healing and hope, we pray this morning for everyone who is seeking health.

We bring before you with special concern and tenderness all who suffer from illness and injury of body, mind, or spirit, and we thank you for all of the loving and skillful hands, hearts, and intellects that tend them and care for them.

At the same time, we confess to you that our nation is both blessed and negligent in our ministries of healing. We are grateful for the many treatments and technologies that are available to relieve suffering, but we lament the inequalities in their delivery. Forgive us for sometimes letting the economics of health care prevail over the compassion of care. Help us to reform and renew the institutions and policies that value some lives and livelihoods more than others.

We confess, too, that we are often confused and overwhelmed by the ethical dilemmas that medicine presents to us. Guide us in finding the paths that honor our reverence for life by vigorously preserving it in some circumstances and by lovingly relinquishing it in others. Be present with us in these times of choice; be present, too, in the doubt and worry of hindsight.

We offer particular prayers this morning for those who suffer from mental illness, and for their families and friends. Help us to educate our neighbors who speak harshly and judgmentally about these ailments, and to temper our own voices with compassion and realism. Bring to the sufferers a measure of patience and hope, and to those who care for them bring wells of persistence, skill, and grace.

We confess that our health care system usually offers neither health nor care to those with mental illness, and we lament the complicated procedures and meager resources that we do offer. Guide us in finding more humane ways to serve our brothers and sisters, and in finding the will to provide those ways.

All these things we pray in the name of the one who is the great healer and model of compassion, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us ..