

June 28, 2009

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8b)

2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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TRANSFORMATION

At a recent meeting of our vestry, the elected leadership of our parish, one member spoke of the importance of transformation in our lives. She made the important observation that sometimes profound and transforming experiences are emotional, (or at least not first and foremost intellectual) and that we fill in or discover or come to the content of the transformation after the fact. I think that was true for me at a critical juncture in my life.

As a teenager I attended a meeting led by a group of charismatic Christians who spoke of powerful experiences they had been granted in their life of faith. It was an age and time in my life when I was seeking just the kind of intensity of experience that they were describing. Toward the end of the evening a man told the story of the woman with hemorrhages from today's gospel. He spoke of her faith, the kind of passion and intensity that would lead her to step into the middle of the crowd, risking death by stoning as a result of one who was considered unclean necessarily touching others. He spoke of the depth of her need for healing, for a return to inclusion in the community and so on. He suggested that if we wanted that kind of faith in our lives we should simply ask for it in prayer. And then he led his group in singing a song during which we were invited to pray and ask for what we wanted in life and ask for what we needed.

I have no memory of making any particular petition or appeal to God, no memory of any intellectual process. What I do remember to this day is the intensity of my desire and the almost 'out of body' experience I was granted, one that defies description, during the singing of that final song of the evening. As it came to an end the woman sitting next to me, a member of the speaker's group said "You look as though you have seen a ghost." Before I really know what was going on I was being ushered into a hallway and being surrounded by people drawing me into a circle and praying. I was horribly uncomfortable and all I really wanted to do was to get out of there, get back to my room and try and make sense of what had happened. In the end I was drawn into a newly forming evangelical Christian group within the school and I assumed along with everybody else that the experience I had been granted was one of Christian conversion. The content of the transformative experience was filled in after the fact. The context

provided the meaning. Our vestry member's observation was true for me: the content of the transformation was filled in after the fact.

From time to time I have wondered whether that really makes me a Christian or whether what I was granted was really a Christian experience in any sense. What I have decided over and over again is that the Christian story is the one that makes the most sense for me for interpreting and shaping a life filled with meaning and purpose. It is not a matter of choosing Jesus and this way of believing over some other faith, the Prophet or the Buddha. It is more a matter of receiving the gift where I find myself, and being open to being transformed by God throughout my life. So as much as I have been adopted, (to use Paul's phrase,) so have I adopted this faith, this adventure, this way of living bravely and passionately at least some of the time. I assume that is also true for you at some level and am grateful to God for our being transformed into what we call the image and likeness of Christ wherever we are privileged to see it.

I wonder if something like this is not what happened to the woman with hemorrhages. Did she have some intellectual process that led her to risk everything or was her need and her desire for healing so great that she was willing to follow her instincts come what may? She was outside or on the edges of society in so many ways. She was a woman in a patriarchal world for starters. She was clearly impoverished by virtue of her illness and she was marked as unclean, deprived of that most basic societal and creative reality of a human touch. For whatever reason, she has decided to act. She has decided to step out of the role that had been defined for her. She has decided to step out of the crowd by stepping into it. She has decided to act over against group think, and in a way it is that action that stopped the flow of life from being sucked out of her in a brutal and cruel world. In a way, when she touched Jesus' robe, her faith had already made her whole. She was already healed. Maybe it was only after the fact that she began, if she ever began, to wonder by what power or possibility or person she was granted healing. Jesus calls her 'daughter'. *Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your disease.* Through her intuitive, instinctive faith she became part of the reordering of the society that otherwise left her a beggar on its edges. She is put ahead, in a sense of a daughter of a leader of the synagogue. At Jairus' house Jesus and Jairus are greeted with the news "Your daughter is dead." But in time, she is raised also. Society is not simply reordered in this story to put a different lot on top, but is reordered to include rich and poor alike, to redefine the edges as people become willing to lay claim to life.

By stepping onto the crowd, the woman stepped out of it. When she pushed her way through the people who had defined her as unclean and marginal, she defined herself claiming herself worthy of God's love. It was her faith that healed her. She made choices including, perhaps, how to follow and nurture that faith. She began to claim who she was created to be rather than allowing herself to be defined solely by the crowd. She acted in faith and maybe the content came later. By stepping into the crowd, the woman with hemorrhages stepped out of it and into the love of God. So may it be for you. So may it be for me.

As is our practice, let's respond to the gospel in silence and in prayer.