

Genesis 12:1-9

Psalm 33:1-12

Romans 4:13-25

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

SERMON: June 11, 2023

BE OF GOOD CHEER, FEAR NOT, FOLLOW ME

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: He restoreth my soul.

Our Gospel reading for this morning consists of two separate incidents recorded in the ninth chapter of Matthew's gospel. The first tells us about how Jesus first invited Matthew to join his small group of disciples, along with a dinner party that occurred apparently at about the same time. This account runs from verse 9 to verse 13, so let's read it first:

Matthew 9: 9-13

What I'd like to draw your attention to particularly at this outset of our reflection is that Jesus here for the first time introduces an image or analogy for himself that he also uses on several other occasions: that of a physician. "Those who are well have no need of a physician," he says, "but those who are sick." I want to emphasize that, because in the second selection from chapter nine, Matthew tells us about two separate cases where Jesus quite literally acts as a physician: one involving a woman with a terrible chronic disease, and the other a twelve year-old girl who was either deathly ill or perhaps had even succumbed to death. So let's read that section now, and then we'll think about these separate incidents together.

Matthew 9: 18-26

Remembering what John, in his Gospel, tells us: that the miracles and other actions of Jesus are to be regarded primarily as signs, pointing to something deeper, I think a way of reading these three incidents is to see in them signs of three kinds of spiritual sickness or disease, for which Jesus alone can be the great spiritual physician.

Let's consider first the woman with the issue of blood. Matthew's account gives us the fewest details about her, saying only that she has been afflicted for twelve

years, but from the other accounts we learn more about her, and how truly desperate her situation must have been. We learn from those accounts that she had spent those twelve years seeking medical help from all the resources available to her, but that it had been to no avail: her condition only became progressively worse. We learn that she had made every attempt to remain unnoticed as she worked her way through the crowd towards Jesus. Why would she have done that? Because the disease from which she suffered, an unceasing flow of menstrual discharge, had spiritual as well as medical significance to the Jewish people among whom she lived. Women in that condition were regarded by Jewish law as ritually unclean, prohibited from worshiping in the temple, forbidden in fact even from all human contact: anyone who touched her, even by accident, would also become ritually unclean, and required to isolate themselves for seven days. Her condition was in fact spiritually equivalent to leprosy, even to death. Just as all Jews were careful never to come in physical contact with a leper or a dead body, on penalty of spiritual defilement, so they were at pains to even touching a woman experiencing her period.

And that explains why the woman was at such pains to slip unnoticed through the crowd of people surrounding Jesus as he proceeded towards the house of Jairus to revive his daughter. It explains why she couldn't come openly to Jesus to solicit his help, but rather tried to slip through and come up behind him, her head covering undoubtedly pulled over her face to avoid being recognized as the unclean woman from whom everyone would shrink, then fall to her knees at the last moment to simply touch the fringe of his outer garment, intending then to slip away unnoticed and anonymous. Her fear was that Jesus would reject her, just as her people, even her own friends, even her own family, had always rejected her.

But of course, Jesus does not reject her. On the contrary, when he feels his own healing power being drawn from him, he seeks the woman out, and after he has identified her, he speaks to her these lovely words, in the presence of all the others gathered around: *Be of good cheer, Daughter, your faith has made you well.* It's important to note that he addresses her as Daughter – his own daughter – as he is on the way to minister to Jairus' daughter. Although we are not given any other details, the fact that he uses such a term of endearment suggests to my imagination that he would have lifted her to her feet, gently raised the head covering that hid her identity, embraced her in full view of a stunned and probably indignant crowd, and then spoken his words of loving inclusion in the presence of them all, while she almost certainly wept with joy and relief into his shoulder.

The miracles of Christ always have spiritual as well as material significance. This woman was certainly cured of her terrible malady; but over and above that, she was cured of an even more terrible spiritual malady: the fear of rejection by Jesus.

And surely in that is the spiritual lesson for all of us. How many of us hesitate to place our reliance completely on him because of our fear of His rejection? We fear that we are not worthy, that our failings and our mistakes are so many and so grievous that even Jesus would turn from us in disapproval.

How many of us have experienced such pain of rejection and disappointment from others in our lives that we shrink from placing our trust even in a heart of perfect love? We fear to share the foolish faith of Charlie Brown, who returns again and again to Lucy's callousness. In how many of us has faith withered to a poor and shrunken thing because our hopes have been so often dashed by the unsympathetic, casual cruelties of others.

To such as us, the words of Jesus to the almost hopeless woman are addressed in perfect assurance: Be of good cheer, he tells her, the same words he offered on another occasion, when he spoke to all those who have been beaten down and rejected by their own broken world: Be of good cheer, he once said: I have overcome the world.

And we find another assurance when we turn to the second of the two incidents recounted in our passage, that involving Jairus' daughter. While Jesus turned his attention to the unfortunate woman, Jairus has been standing by, no doubt full of anxiety and impatience and concern for his deathly ill daughter. When he and Jesus resume their passage to his home, another of the synoptic accounts tells us that messengers met them from the house, with the terrible news that his daughter has died, and Jesus turns to the bereaved father and says to him: Do not be afraid, only believe. (Mark 5: 36)

When they reach the house, Jesus dismisses the professional mourners who have already gathered there, leads the parents and his three disciples into the girl's room and restores her to life. And that, of course, is another great material miracle. But once again, we are invited to reflect on the deeper spiritual significance of what Jesus has just done. To the 12 year old girl, he has restored life, but what about Jairus himself, the ruler of the synagogue, the man of substantial means and high social status in his community? What terrible spiritual fear in him has Jesus relieved?

My suggestion is that it is the fear of loss. Jesus has brought his three closest disciples with them to teach them something we must all learn on our Christian walk: that the gain of trusting in Jesus infinitely outweighs the loss.

Elsewhere in Matthew's gospel as well as the other gospel accounts, we find an instruction recorded that on the face of it has seemed to many to be extraordinarily harsh. They all record an occasion when the biological family of Jesus comes to persuade him to return with them to his old way of life, and in response, Jesus resists their pleas, and then turns to his disciples gathered around them and says, in effect: You, not these, are my true family.

Is he rejecting his own family? Obviously not. He's instead using a powerful and memorable symbolism to assure his followers that whatever is lost in following him will be resurrected and restored to them, now clothed with the heavenly garb of eternity.

This of course contains within it the assurance that we will again be reunited with our loved ones one day, as Jairus was reunited with his daughter. But it is much more than that. It's the instruction and revelation that we must never let the fear of loss guide our steps away from Christ, whether it's the loss of social status, the loss of worldly opportunities, the loss of the regard of our professional and social peers, of our friends, even of our family. It's the instruction and blessed assurance that St. Paul captured in exquisite and timeless expression when he wrote to the church at Philippi:

*7*But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. *8*Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ *9*and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; *10*that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection...(Philippians 3: 7-10)

So the fear of Christ's rejection is gone, the fear of loss is assuaged by the assurance of divine restoration. And that brings us in conclusion back to the account of the calling of Matthew that was used to introduce these blessed assurances. What fear of Matthew was relieved when Jesus stopped by his tax-collector's booth on that fateful day.

By the time Jesus enters his life, Matthew has established himself as a successful but extremely minor functionary in service to the mighty Roman Empire. Aside from its material comfort, his future held nothing but the unchanging daily resentment of his countrymen and the condescension of his Imperial overlords, a life of fleeting material rewards in exchange for the dreary repetitions of a shameful routine that contributed nothing good, nothing of spiritual value to the world. His life was like that of Sisyphus, destined to spend his life rolling a great boulder to the top of a mountain, only to have it roll back again to the bottom. What was confronted and overcome that day when Jesus called to him was Matthew's fear of the meaninglessness of his life.

And who among us has not, at least occasionally, felt the weight of that same, terrible fear? It's the fear that Shakespeare gave immortal expression to through Macbeth, and that must echo in the souls of all those facing their own lives without the promise of Christ:

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

It was that fear that had always haunted Matthew's life as he walked each day to his booth, whether it had risen to consciousness in him or not. It was that fear that weighed down his spirit every day and every hour as he accepted the little bags of money offered him by the unending procession of angry and resigned and resentful people who stood before him, as he made a note in his ledger record, as he handed over a little certificate of compliance, and then gestured to the next one in line to come forward. It was that fear that cast a cloud of gray meaninglessness over his entire life, past, present and future.

And it was that cloud that was dissipated, that fear that was relieved, when he set down his quill, closed his ledger book, stood up, gave one last look at the line of people, straightened his robes, and responded in obedience to the two words of

divine promise that Jesus offered him, and that he offers to each of us today:
Follow me.

And so our prayer for this morning, Father, is that you enable us to experience the freedom from the three spiritual fears signified by our Lord's healing intercession in our Gospel reading for today: the fear of not trusting Him, the fear of losing our own lives in gaining the life he offers to us, and the fear of embarking on a new and wondrous voyage into the great and unexplored continents of His love, and we ask for these things in His name.