

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 5 FEBRUARY 2012

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Psalm 147: 1-11; Mark 1: 29-39

“He took her Hand”

There is a wonderful story from a renowned professor of preaching named Fred Craddock. He often tells the story of a young minister, newly graduated from the seminary who is serving in his first church. He gets a call telling him that a church member, an elderly woman who has given nearly her entire life to the church, is in the hospital and not doing well. The woman suffers from severe breathing problems and now has pneumonia and doesn't appear to be getting any better. She is so weak that she can not get up out of bed and the doctors are not holding out any hope for her recovery. So with this dire situation the family calls the church and asks for the young pastor to come and pray with her, anoint her and give her a final communion.

All the way to the hospital he is thinking about what to say to this Christian woman, what words of comfort he can give her to prepare her for her imminent death. He thinks of how young he is and how completely unprepared for this moment and he mumbles a quick prayer that God will give him the strength and courage he needs. When he finally arrives at the hospital he heads up to her room for a visit. The room is darkened and the hospital wing is quiet. The nurses move in and out of the room gently so as not to disturb her final hours. The young pastor sits on a chair next to the bed and talks with her for a few minutes, just small talk really, nothing earth shattering. When he finally makes ready to leave he asks the old woman if she would like him to pray for her and she answers, "Yes of course. That's why I wanted you to come." He then politely asks, "And what would you like me to pray for?" The old woman looks him straight in the eye and says in a bit of a surprised voice, "Why, I want you to pray that God will heal me."

The young pastor is a bit surprised by the question and he takes her hands and starts fumbling over the words. Still, somewhere in all the blizzard of words he ends up praying for what she asked – that God would heal her. When he finally says the Amen at the end of the prayer, the woman says, "You know, I think it worked! I think I'm healed!" And she gets out of bed and begins to run up and down the hallway of the hospital yelling, "Praise God! I'm healed! Praise God! I'm healed!"

Meanwhile, the young pastor in a stupor, stumbles to the stairwell, walks down five flights of stairs, makes his way to the parking lot and somehow manages to find his car. As he fumbles to get his keys out of his pocket, he slumps back in the seat and looks heavenward and yells, "Don't you ever do that to me again!"

Fred Craddock tells that story and then connects it to the mountaintop moments of life. Professor Craddock says that we are all like that young pastor – profound moments, mountaintop moments – yes even – resurrection moments fall into our laps and we are not prepared; we are caught off guard and are unsure what to do with them.

On a personal level I relate to this story in a number of ways: I have been in the position of that young pastor more than a couple of times. Driving to a hospital or other difficult situation praying for words, finding myself at someone's bedside mumbling and not being able to think of something

meaningful or helpful to say and petering out into an embarrassed silence, but also, at times, hearing words come out I never knew were in me, or finding strength and inspiration that literally work miracles.

I have experienced the miraculous healing power of prayer from both sides, as a pastor and as a patient. As a pastor I recognise the temptation to run and hide somewhere after something like that happens. As a patient I know the awkwardness of the 21st century cynic who dares not own up to having something like prayer actually, factually, show change or improvement.

Prayer, in our context and culture is supposed to be something that is a good natured, fairly harmless activity some people indulge in but most will not expect much from in my experience. Even, or even especially, in our part of the Church.

Even writing this sermon this week I have felt reluctance, hesitation and plain resistance to talking about a subject that is very close to my heart and has become one of the re-occurring, inescapable themes of my life and ministry: prayer and healing.

Text and personal experience come inescapably close together this morning, so close that I feel I can't but talk about things I usually avoid because they don't fit in with my picture of myself or of the Church, the ministry and the world I am part of.

My Western, rational, scientific mind does not believe in healing of physical ailments through prayer. Psychological, psychosomatic ailments, ok, but physical? Definitely not. When it comes to prayer healing I can accept a Jesus with a strong authority and charisma that could help people with mental or psychosomatically induced ailments to heal. But a Jesus who can change the chemical or physical processes of the body is way out of my comfort zone. And as a pastor I find it exceedingly difficult to pray for healing of that kind. Simply because I don't believe prayer has a lot of influence on that kind of thing. And yet.

When I visited my rheumatologist last Tuesday and received an astonishing "All clear" after decades of chronic pain that nothing and nobody could help, he was the one who was surprised I refused to believe prayer, meditation and mental control techniques had got me there. "More and more" he said, "we discover that the body is nothing but vibrating energy. That chemical and physical changes take place in the body all the time, and that the mind, prayer, meditation, concentration, trance, can be very successful in influencing and sometimes even reversing those processes." He was the one who, after I told him I had been pain free in an earlier period for three weeks after a prayer retreat, suggested hypnosis and meditation in September as a last ditch attempt to bring the levels of pain down. He was the one who, when he asked had anything ever helped, he, instead of shaking his head, nodded.

I am still finding words for this, and I will stop talking about it now. I just feel it is important to acknowledge why and how this text affects me so deeply and personally. The experience of Peter's mother-in-law is mine. At the moment I live with the astonishing feeling of having been raised (the word used in the text is the same word used for Jesus being raised from the dead in early Christian literature, and that is exactly how it feels: as being raised to a brand new life), put back on my feet, and given back my life. Like her I want to do something with that life. Unlike her I am not entirely sure how and what. I am sure it will be service. Like her, who starts serving immediately, starts "deaconing" to Jesus, I feel a strong drive to do something with this experience that will serve others.

I also recognise myself in Jesus. After raising Peter's mother-in-law, after discovering that somehow healing power has been at work through him, he retires in prayer. I don't know if it was with the

same shattered and overawed feeling the young pastor and I share, but I am sure coming to terms with what happened through him was probably part of it. I know how overwhelming it is when you become part of the mystery of healing and wholeness taking shape. And it is scary too. His disciples don't completely get that. They only see successful work that needs to be continued, people waiting at the door, the sick and possessed longing to be touched with resurrection. Where were you?

Praying.

Years ago, after I set up a prayer ministry in one of my previous churches a colleague I had invited to join us, arrived late, only to leave after 5 minutes. "I don't know what they are doing in there" he apparently told our office lady, "they are sitting with their eyes closed, doing nothing". I sit, or lie, or walk, with or without my eyes closed for at least an hour a day, each day. I try to listen for God's presence and make room for those who need my prayer to walk into my thoughts. Sometimes that presence is warm, intimate, and full of voices, sometimes it is empty, dreary and confusing or unsettling. The rheumatologist reckons that this practice, this rhythm of hard work and regular prayer practice has prepared me for healing. Has helped my brain become strong and flexible enough to be able to change what seemed impossible to change.

As with music, silence is an integral part of a healthy, faithful life. It is not only the sounds that make the music, not only the action that makes life, it is the silences in between which create the rhythm and the melody.

Many giants of faith have been familiar with that pattern of life, especially those who made some pretty big changes to the physical circumstances of life. This week I read how prayer was a central practice in both the public and private life of Dr Martin Luther King Jr. and how he intensely believed and depended on the power of prayer. King set aside a day per week to pray and regularly led his followers in prayer at mass meetings and even on the angry streets. He lived that same rhythm as we see laid down in Jesus' life in this week's text: work for healing - pray - work for wholeness - pray - etc. Showing, like Jesus, the incredible power of that combination.

When Jenny and I got together over the holidays for a retreat, what struck us most about this congregation was the faithfulness to and care for God, faith, tradition and each other that saturates it. Listening to the text this morning I think those are characteristics that go well with such a life of prayer and action, contemplation and motivation. Faithful attention to worship and service, to God and to each other, in a strong, strengthening rhythm of action and prayer in the faith and trust that the divine power that reaches out to us is indeed capable of radical change, even where we may deem it nigh impossible. Amen.