

“Take Heart!” by Rev. Denice K Leslie

Denise K. Leslie  
June 8, 2008  
4<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost  
Matthew 9:9-13, 18 – 26

“Take Heart!”



A man went to see the pastor of an inner-city church. Though the pastor was used to the conditions of poverty and want surrounding his parish, he was touched by the story this man told him.

The man described the needs of a poor widow. He said "She has four hungry children to feed, is confined to her bed with no money for a doctor, and she owes three months rent and is about to be evicted from her apartment."

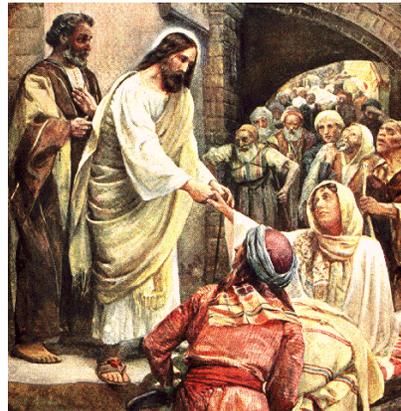
The man then explained that he was trying to help raise the needed rent money, \$600. Digging into his own wallet while racking his brains for other solutions, the pastor applauded the man's concern and commitment. "Of course I'll help," he said, "If you can give your time to this cause, so can I. By the way, how do you know this woman?" "I'm the landlord," the man replied.<sup>1</sup> +

My favorite Bishop,



William Willimon asks us today: “What is the main requirement to be a disciple of Jesus?” Answer: “To be a sinner. At least according to today’s gospel.”<sup>2</sup> This gospel is packed full of sinners. Even the folks who think they aren’t most definitely ARE.

Who do you most identify with in this story? Matthew, the tax collector and cheat, the woman with the chronic flow of blood, the father of the dead daughter? How about the religious leaders put out over Jesus’ hanging out with folks who were known no-goods? Or the curious crowds who gathered everywhere Jesus went or how about the mourners of the dead girl who laughed at Jesus’ assertion that she wasn’t dead but sleeping?



After sharing this story at a conference, Harvey Cox “asked an audience of 600 mostly Christian professionals whom they identified with.

When he asked who identified with the bleeding woman, about a hundred raised their hands. When he asked who identified with the anxious Roman father, more of the rest raised their hands.

When he asked who identified with the curious crowd, most raised their hands. But when he asked who identified with Jesus, only six people raised their hands.

Something is very wrong here. Of 600 more or less professional Christians, only one out of a hundred identified with Jesus. Maybe more actually did but were afraid to raise their hands lest that seem arrogant.

<sup>1</sup> Homiletics Illustrations

<sup>2</sup> Pulpit Resource, June 8, 2008 p. 43.

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But again, something is wrong with our concept of Christianity if it seems arrogant to identify with Jesus. That is exactly what we are supposed to do! We're supposed to identify with Jesus, act like Jesus, be like Jesus. **That is what Christianity is supposed to be about -- the imitation of Christ.**<sup>3</sup>

Yet I would venture to say the vast majority of us see ourselves solely as the people in need of Christ's healing power in our lives. As if we had never received the healing of God's saving love and grace.

We all stand in need of the love and grace and forgiveness of God in our lives. Just to hear those words of Jesus to the ill woman who had the faith and courage to reach out and touch him, “*Take heart!*” makes our hearts leap.

But on the other hand—is this place of needing to hear Jesus say, “Take heart,” always and forever going to be just about us? If our call is to be like Jesus—if we are among those who have received the good news of God's unconditional love and grace then his words, “*Take Heart!*” take on new meaning for us—we hear those words differently—they are the battle cry of gratitude, joy and good news we have to share with the world.

They are the gift of God's grace we have received and now are eager to share. They are our first aide kit for mending the broken hearted.

But are WE *never* among the broken hearted just because we're Christians? At times of severe illness? At times of grief and loss? At times of desperation and despair? At times of deep depression or betrayal?

Here is the truth in love: No, not ever again in quite the same way: Not in the SAME state of neediness—that place of need that does not know the gospel, that does not know the life-saving activity and grace of God for us in our place of need or in the world. That does not know the resurrected Lord of Life: Jesus Christ.

We may fall off the wagon—or even feel pushed under the wheels, but we know the wagon is there and we climb back on with the Holy Spirit's help through each other.

After all, Jesus' words, “Take Heart” can only be announced to another in need by one who was lost and now is found, who has been in need of healing and who has received healing.

In other words, from one who has heart—the *heart of Jesus*—who has received that saving grace for oneself, who knows first hand *the touch of Jesus* on his or her own life—like the father of the dead daughter, or the woman healed of the flow of blood or Matthew the loathed crook of a tax collector turned disciple.

It's all about grace. And because it's all about grace, even in the midst of our genuine need we know God is with us. We know how much God cares. It's not about how we feel—feelings are okay—it's about the embrace of God's love which gives us a hand to hold—a hand others are in dire need of having extended to them through our hands even in the midst of our own need. It's like this story a shepherd told:

“You know, springtime is a tough time for sheep and shepherds. It's lambing time. It's a time of tragedy. When many ewes are giving birth, the shepherd must often deal with problems. Sometimes a lamb dies at birth, sometimes an ewe, giving birth.

Here's the scene: Over here is a mother sheep that has lost her baby. Over there is a lamb that has lost its mother. But sheep are difficult animals. A sheep will not take a lamb that is not its own.

And so, we have the situation of a mother full of the milk that will not nourish her baby because she has no baby to feed. And we have a lamb, hungry for life-giving nourishment and no mother to feed it. It is a scene of abundance and scarcity - all at once.

And this is what the good shepherd must do. To reconcile this moment of tragedy, the shepherd takes the lamb that has died and slits its throat. Then he washes the motherless lamb

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<sup>3</sup> M. Scott Peck, *Further Along The Road Less Traveled*. P. 210

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in the blood of the lamb that has died. Only then will the mother accept and feed the motherless lamb as her own.”<sup>4</sup>

The important thing here for us is not to be like the childless mother ewe and block out our Christian outreach to others in need—to keep us from being wounded healers. We are called to embrace the motherless lambs of this world—whether we feel they rightfully belong in the family or not.

God doesn't call the perfect, the unafraid, the totally secure, those who will never have a health problem or never make mistakes, never hurt others, or true believers. Belief isn't enough. Faith is.

God instead washes these needy things about us in the blood of the lamb and uses them—redeems them and makes us useful to others. A woman who knows shares:

“In 1990, I had undergone back surgery and was on disability. I was depressed and just trying to get through each day. One afternoon, when I was putting out the trash,



I saw a little boy digging in a dumpster for food. I took him inside, made him a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, and sent him home.

Fifteen minutes later, there was a knock at my door, and I opened it to find six more kids

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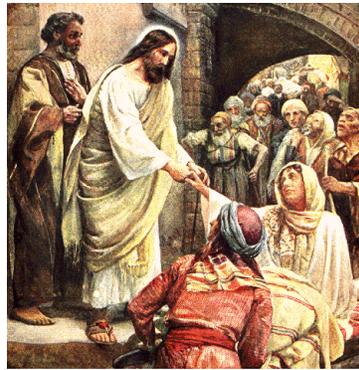
<sup>4</sup> With thanks to Harlan Bemis, for sharing the story from: "Keeping The Faith in Babylon: A Pastoral Resource For Christians In Exile", a weekly set of comments and reflections on the Revised Common Lectionary texts by Barry Robinson (Lion's Head, Ontario, Canada).

standing there. "Is it true that you're giving away peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches?" one of them asked.

I couldn't believe that there was no one caring for these kids. It was summer, and school was out. They told me that their parents had to work. The next day, more children showed up, and more arrived the day after that.

When school began again, kids came and asked for help with homework. Volunteers and supplies from local churches and schools poured in. My landlord donated an apartment, and soon I had 100 children coming to visit each day. Ten years later, five of the kids have begun community college.

I never thought that making one peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich would grow into something that would affect so many lives - especially mine. Those kids pulled me out of myself. There was a point when I stopped thinking about my own pain and started concentrating on somebody else's. It's true that when you help others, you help yourself.”<sup>5</sup>



Yes, when you help others in Jesus name you take heart and you give heart. It's called grace—straight from the heart of Jesus.

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<sup>5</sup> —Bea Salazar, "Is it true that you're giving away peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches?" Fast Company, December 2000, 108.