



THE MISSION OF SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

Father Alan's Blog

For the Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Trinity - November 14, 2021

"She said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.'"

St. Matthew 9:21 (NIV)

One Sunday morning, a parish priest noticed a seven-year-old boy staring at a large plaque that hung in the foyer of the church. The plaque was covered with names, and small Canadian flags were mounted on either side of it. The boy had been staring at the plaque for some time, so the priest walked up beside the boy and said quietly:

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Father,"

replied the boy, still focused on the plaque. A moment later he asked,

"Father, what is this?"

"Well, son..."

the priest replied,

"...it's a memorial to all the young men and women who died in the service."

For the longest time the two of them stood together silently staring at the plaque. Finally, in a barely audible voice, the little boy asked,

“Which service, Father – the 8:00 or the 10:30?”



Children’s ability to state profound truths in the simplest of terms never ceases to amaze me. In fact, their uncluttered perspective has often helped to keep mine on an even keel.

For example, my eldest son shared this profundity with me when he was only four years of age. I was tired of bumping into everything whenever I’d walk in to the bathroom at night. So I decided to “borrow” one of my boys’ nightlights. (They had more than a few of them, and this one was not being used at the moment – besides, it had a teddy bear-shaped shade to boot.) For a few years, that teddy bear lit the way for me at night, resulting in, to my immense relief, a significantly declined injury rate. In any event, one afternoon, not too long after I’d “installed” the nightlight, my then four-year-old son happened to notice it and announced in his most matter-of-fact voice:

“You don’t need to use it during the day – only when it’s dark.”

To say the least, the enormity of my young son’s simple statement stunned me – for his version of this simple truth caused me to instantly “rearrange my spiritual furniture”:

“Lights are only needed in dark places.”



On his 1996 CD entitled, "Danny Boy", Canadian-born Irish tenor John McDermott sings the most hauntingly beautiful song. Written by John McCutcheon (an American folk music singer-songwriter), and based on a true story, the song, "Christmas in the Trenches" has much to say about light being brought into a dark place:

*"My name is Francis Toliver, I come from Liverpool.
Two years ago the war was waiting for me after school.
To Belgium and to Flanders, Germany to here.
I fought for King and country I love dear.*

*"'Twas Christmas in the trenches, where the frost so bitter hung.
The frozen fields of France were still, no Christmas song was sung.
Our families back in England were toasting us that day,
Their brave and glorious lads so far away.*

*"I was lying with my messmate on the cold and rocky ground.
When across the lines of battle came a most peculiar sound.
Says I, 'now listen up me boys.' Each soldier strained to hear
As one young German voice sang out so clear.*

*"He's singing bloody well y'know,' my partner says to me.
Soon one by one each German voice joined in in harmony.
The cannons rested silent, and the gas clouds rolled no more.
As Christmas brought us respite from the war.*

*"As soon as they were finished, and a reverent pause was spent,
'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen' struck up some lads from Kent.
The next they sang was 'Stille Nacht,' 'tis 'Silent Night,' says I.
And in two tongues one song filled up that sky.*

*"There's someone coming towards us,' the front line sentry cried.
All sights were fixed on one lone figure trudging from their side.
His truce flag like a Christmas star shone on that plain so bright
As he bravely strolled unarmed into the night.*

*“Then one by one on either side walked into no-man’s land.
With neither gun nor bayonet we met there hand to hand.
We shared some secret brandy and we wished each other well.
And in a flare-lit soccer game we gave ‘em hell.*

*“We traded chocolates, cigarettes and photographs from home.
These sons and fathers from far away from families of their own.
Young Sanders played the squeezebox and they had a violin.
This curious and unlikely band of men.*

*“Soon daylight stole upon us and France was France once more.
With sad farewells we each began to settle back to war.
But the question haunted every heart that lived that wondrous night.
‘Whose family have I fixed within my sights?’*

*“‘Twas Christmas in the trenches, where the frost so bitter hung.
The frozen fields of France were warmed as songs of peace were sung.
For the walls they kept between us to exact the work of war
Had been crumbled and were gone forevermore.*

*“My name is Francis Toliver, in Liverpool I dwell.
Each Christmas come since World War I, I’ve learned its lessons well.
For the ones who call the shots won’t be among the dead and lame,
And on each end of the rifle we’re the same.”*

Through the miracle of the “Christmas Truce”, love overcame hate and good triumphed over evil. For on Christmas Eve in 1914, “The Light of the World”, “God Incarnate”, “Emmanuel”, – Jesus Christ, came into a very dark place – and lives were forever changed.



(What follows is based, in large part, on Chapter 7 of Max Lucado’s 1993 book, “He Still Moves Stones”.)

The Gospel Lesson for today (from St. Matthew 9:18-26) bears the same message. It's the story-within-a-story of a woman who experienced light coming into her dark world the day she met Jesus.

(You know, it's said that on a clear, dark night one can actually see the light from a single match from a distance of 50 miles. In other words, when things are their darkest, a little light can seem like a lot.)

Let's try to imagine, then, what receiving "The Light of the World" must have been like for someone who had known the blackest darkness for most of her adult life. We never find out her name, but we are told of her situation. (I like St. Mark's rendering of the event the best - one can find it in Chapter 5 of his Gospel, and according to verses 24b-26:

"A large crowd followed Jesus and pushed very close around him. Among them was a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered very much from many doctors and had spent all the money she had, but instead of improving, she was getting worse.")

In short, the woman's world was:



midnight black;



grope-in-the-dark-and-hope-for-help black; and



darker than any nightlight-could-hope-to-dispel black.

"Bleeding for twelve years...suffered very much...spent all the money she had...getting worse."

Most likely, the woman had a chronic menstrual disorder, a perpetual issue of blood. Such a condition would be difficult for any woman of any era, but for a Jewess, nothing could be worse, as the unfortunate woman would be considered "unclean" - meaning that no part of her life was left unaffected:



Domestically – anything she touched was also considered unclean (thus, no washing of dishes, no sweeping of floors, no keeping of house and home – in short, no purpose or identity);



Sexually – she could not touch her husband;



Maternally – she could not bear children; and



Spiritually – she was not permitted to even *enter* the temple.

Because of her afflicted condition, therefore, the woman was both:



physically, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted; and socially ostracized.



We read (in verse 26a) that the woman had turned to “many” doctors for help; however, not surprisingly, these so-called doctors didn’t cure her – but in the process, they sure drained her of all the money she had. Their selfish heaping of financial hardship on top of the:



physical trauma,



emotional anxiety,



social pressure, and



spiritual tension

already being borne by this woman only served to add insult to her injury. Hence, we are told in verse 26b that:

“... instead of getting better, she grew worse.”

The woman is all but spent. She awoke daily in a body that no one wanted, and she is down to her last prayer – and when we encounter her, she is about to pray it (verse 28b):

“‘If I can just touch his clothes,’ she thinks, ‘I will be healed.’”

What a risk for her to take. In order to touch Jesus, she would have to chance touching other people, and if one of them recognized her, it would be “hello rebuke, goodbye cure” – but, really, what choice did she have? After all, she had no:



money; or



clout; or



friends; or



solutions.

There was no guarantee, of course – the woman only hoped that Jesus would respond. She longed for it, but she didn’t know if He would. All she had was a crazy hunch that Jesus could help her, and a high hope that He would. All the woman knew was that Jesus was there and that He was good – and isn’t that a good definition of “faith”?

For faith is not the belief that God will do what we want; faith is the belief that God will do what is right. God’s way of looking at things is completely opposite to ours (perhaps, more accurately, ours is completely opposite to His). In and through His word (that is, Holy Scripture) and His Word (namely, His Son, Jesus Christ) God shows us that:



the more hopeless one’s situation is, the more likely salvation is just around the corner; and



the greater one’s cares are, the more genuine one’s prayers tend to be.

And just like my former bathroom at three in the morning, the darker the room, the greater the need for light. So, with respect to the teddy bear nightlight, my young son was displaying wisdom far beyond his four years when he reminded me that:

“You don’t need to use it during the day – only when it’s dark.”

How true! During the day, I rarely noticed my nightlight, but as the shadows grew, so did my gratitude. Similarly, a healthy woman never would have appreciated the power of a touch of the hem of Jesus' robe. However, this woman was sick, and she was well beyond caring what the crowd thought. As a result, when her dilemma met Jesus' dedication, a miracle occurred. Note that her part in the healing was very small – all she did was extend her arm through the crowd:

“If only I can touch Him.”

But that's the point:



**she made the effort,
she did something,**

and God did the rest. Because:



**healing begins when we do something;
healing commences when we reach out; and
healing starts when we take a step.**

God's help is very near and always available, but it is only given to those who seek it – **for nothing results from apathy**. The **great work** in this story is the mighty healing that occurred, but the **great truth** is that the healing began with the woman's touch. And with that small, courageous gesture, she experienced Jesus' tender power.



Compared to God's part, ours is miniscule, but necessary; we don't have to do much – **but we have to do something**:



Write a letter.



Ask forgiveness.



Phone a counsellor.



Confess.



Call Mom.



Visit a doctor.



Be baptized.



Feed a hungry person.



Pray.



Teach.



Go.

So, just like the solitary German soldier leaving the relative safety of his trench in order to offer a flag of truce, we, too, need to step out in faith. Accordingly, we need to do something that **demonstrates faith**, for as St. James warns us in Chapter 2, verse 17 of his General Epistle:

“...faith if it is not accompanied by action, is dead...”



In other words, **faith – with no effort – is no faith at all.**



But here’s the good news – *God will* respond.

God has never rejected a genuine gesture of faith – **never**. In fact, He honours radical, risk-taking faith:



when arks are built, lives are saved;



when soldiers march, Jerichos tumble;



when staffs are raised, seas still open;



when a lunch is shared, thousands are fed; and



when His garment is touched, Jesus still stops and responds.

So whether it's in:



**the trenches on either side of “No Man’s Land”; or
the silence of a deeply wounded heart,**

Jesus Christ, “The Light of the World”, can dispel all darkness and bring healing to:



bodies;



minds; and



souls.

We only need to:



**drop everything; and
reach out to touch Him.**

And that goes **double** for:



rifles;



social pretenses; and



teddy bear nightlights.



Dearest Reader in Christ:

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