

“Causes for Rejoicing ”

Do you have any reason to rejoice today?

Think about it for a moment. I don't mean things for which you may be thankful (although those are important). I don't mean those things for which you know you should be grateful. I'm not even talking about those things that tend to make you happy. I am asking you to think about something that gives you real cause to rejoice today.

In today's Gospel St. Luke wrote of those that had gathered around Jesus, ***“... the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.”*** Now they had cause for rejoicing. They had just witnessed a *bona fide* miracle. There are lots of things that go on today that get the label “miraculous”: a person has a building explode under him and survives; a child falls out a window and is given back to her mother unharmed; a fire breaks out in a home and each family member escapes unscathed. Are these truly “miracles” or do we use that label to express our amazement, our wonder, our inability to explain?

This brings us into a tricky arena: because one person came through an horrific event (say, an earthquake) yet hundreds and thousands wound up dead or injured. Is that one who was spared a miracle? What does that tell us about all the others who suffered? It raises the question of “Why?” It is a question for which I have no answer.

Or to be more precise, it is a question for which I have no satisfactory answer. People suffer because of evil, because of sin. Some suffer for their own evil behaviors, thoughts, words. Some suffer because of others' evil behaviors, thoughts, words. Some have troubles simply because the world is a cellpool, and the pieces that fall out hit at random intervals.

But in this synagogue on this day, there was a woman present whose suffering was both obvious and severe. Luke tells us she had ***“a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.”*** From Luke the Physician, this seems

a less than clinical diagnosis; we really don't have a medical explanation for this woman's condition.

Bruce MacKenzie put this question to a group of women in his church: *“What in your own experience might cause a woman to be bent over for eighteen years?”* He writes, *“A woman in the crowd quickly replied, ‘Her children! Eighteen years is the minimum sentence parenthood brings.’ Another woman spoke up and said: ‘Don't forget her husband. She was probably permanently bent over from picking up his dirty socks for thirty years.’ Still another woman said: ‘Maybe she was tired of working like a slave for minimum wage or even tired of working like a slave at home for no wages at all.’ ‘Or, perhaps, every time she held her head up and tried to be somebody, the people around her—both male and female—did all they could to deflate and diminish her again.’”*

Interestingly, Luke blames her condition, not on some physical or biological cause, but on **“a spirit.”** We are in a realm here that creates much difficulty for contemporary people. We seem comfortable enough discussing medical problems; but now we are told what is before us is a spiritual problem.

Gary E. Smith writes of his training to become a chaplain: *“What I did not know then is that in that hospital, we the student chaplains were buying into the medical model of being cured: cut out the cancer, do the heart bypass, set the broken bone, prescribe the medication for pain and for killing the virus. If we could not do that, what good were we? Here is what I have learned, what I knew all along, but did not see, what you must know in your own lives, that to be cured is one thing, to be healed is another...To be cured is to get rid of one particular ailment. To be healed is to be at peace with our whole self and the world around us. Someone can be cured yet not be fully healed. On the other hand, someone can be dying on their death bed and at the same time be healed...be at peace with their neighbor, their world, their God, and themselves.”*

The manner in which we approach physical problems is inherently

different than the way by which we must approach a spiritual problem. On the old M*A*S*H TV show, Father Mulcahey would sometimes bemoan the fact that his role didn't seem as important as what the doctors and nurses were doing. Each time he came to that point of sadness, or disappointment, or even despair, someone would come into the unit whose needs could not be met by the medical staff. Guess who was the only one who could really address that need?

Jesus confronts the spiritual need head on: He *“saw her, ... called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’ [Then] he laid his hands on her...”* Laying on hands is not always necessary in Jesus' acts of healing — many times He healed simply by speaking, or being touched, or even from a substantial distance. But in this case, laying on hands is a mark of Jesus dealing with the spiritual cause of her problem.

That this is work being done in the spiritual realm is emphasized when the leader of the synagogue says to the crowd (please note, not to Jesus; this is called triangulation, and it messes up communication something fierce) *“No, this is work and it cannot be done on the Sabbath!”* Strictly speaking, he was right; it was work — spiritual work. What else would one do on the Sabbath? Jesus calls him “hypocrite,” a word we make synonymous with “phoney” but which in Greek meant one who wore a mask on the stage. In this case the mask is righteousness, used to cover up a lack of compassion. Jesus rips that mask off.

Now, all that takes us a fair distance away from my initial question before you: *“Do you have any reason to rejoice today?”* But maybe not so far away as might first seem to be the case.

Have you any answer? Do you have any reason to rejoice today? Some of you may be sitting there thinking, *“What a dumb question!”* Some of you may be feeling a bit embarrassed because you didn't come up with a good answer. Maybe one or two of you are upset because you think somebody else might “take” your answer before you could blurt it out.

Most of us have a hard time identifying causes for rejoicing. We can be really explicit when it comes to our gripes. Do we allow ourselves to get too caught up in negativity? Too focused on problems and not enough on blessings? I'm not saying that we should just *"Pack up your troubles in that old kit bag and smile, smile, smile,"* inanely pretending that nothing is wrong anywhere.

But . . . well, listen again to the prophet Isaiah.

"If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday." In other words: **Rejoice!**

"The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail." **Rejoice!**

"If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth..." **Rejoice!**

Or how about the writer of Hebrews?

"... you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, (Rejoice!) and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven (Rejoice!), and to God the judge of all (Rejoice!), and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, (Rejoice!) and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, (Rejoice!) and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." (Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!)

Not done yet: “... *since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.*” **Rejoice!**

You could take any number of passages of the Scriptures and walk through them like this and just heap up massive piles of reasons to rejoice. The folks who witnessed the healing of this women in the synagogue had ample reason to rejoice just in that miraculous healing. But pay attention to what Luke tells us: they were “*rejoicing at ALL the wonderful things that he was doing.*” When you enter into the Scriptures you witness the myriad ways by which God is at work in your life, in your family, in your workplace, in your community, in this congregation, that witness will penetrate though the veil of depression, disappointment, heartache, sorrow, anger, hostility, upset and bring you to a place of rejoicing.

“*Forget your troubles, come on be happy,*” makes for a nice lyric, but it doesn’t seem appropriate when standing at the graveside, or near the hospital bed, or in a thousand other places where life takes us into a valley of tears. But in the midst of tragedy, mild disturbance, life-altering horror, or just a bad-hair-day, there is always cause for rejoicing, because no matter what happens or doesn’t happen, this remains true: “*our God is a consuming fire*” of love and compassion for us. We are His!
Rejoice!

Amen.