

Alzheimers/Dementia: Restoration -Right Here, Right Now
Mark 5:21-43
Linda Yates, June 28, 2009

As many of you know, I was at the Lutheran Seminary of Philadelphia, during my study leave. I learned many things there, not the least of which was from Dr. Karl Krueger, head librarian. He explained to us the C.E.I. The Cosmic Emotional Index. You may have encountered this force in your own lives. The Cosmic Emotional Index, as it applies to libraries works like this. If you are three days before your deadline and realize that you have forgotten a book and need to order it from the library in order to finish your paper and the library has an average time range of 3-7 shipping days - it will take seven days to ship it to you. If you plan ahead and order it one month before the deadline, the book will arrive the next day. Nobody knows why. It just works that way. You know that. The photocopier fails at the most important time and the traffic slows to a crawl when you are in the very most hurry. The Cosmic Emotional Index.

So it was, one day I was late for meeting someone in my office. Red lights all the way. Then, turning left from Connaught onto Almon and waiting for the light to turn green and then ...nothing. No movement. Two lights go by and I am getting more and more frustrated and thinking about getting out of my car and then the car in front of me hesitatingly turns left into the intersection and then....nothing. Something is clearly wrong. Two more light changes, people honking (they all have trouble with the Cosmic Emotional Index too, obviously). I am about to get out of my car to see if she is okay and then she pulls forward. She is driving very slowly down Almon Street and then stops. Full stop in the middle of the road. I pull out to pass her and see that she is elderly and she is crying. She looks very confused, lost and has that fearful wide eyed look that I have seen on many Alzheimers/dementia patients. I find a place to pull over and am about to get in my car and see that a couple of other cars have stopped and people are already by her open window talking with her. I feel ashamed for my impatience and begin worrying about the woman. Who was she? Why is she in a car when she can't drive? Who is in her life?

I have a young friend who is a police officer. He says while the crime rate is decreasingly steadily, their work in other areas is increasing, including dealing with people with Alzheimers or Dementia who are lost or who are in trouble.

One in eleven people over the age of 65 are living with Alzheimers or dementia. It is important to remember that ten out of eleven are not, despite what the media leads us to believe about senior citizens. The vast majority of people over the age of 65 are sharp as tacks. However, our society is not ready by any stretch of the imagination to deal with the tsunami of this illness that is beginning to hit us. It is the total numbers that are beginning to affect us. Many of our own congregation have been affected, either by being struck by this illness themselves or living and/or loving someone who has it. It is an illness that results in social isolation as people lose their routines, their initiative and often basic social skills. It is an illness that results in isolation because people who care do not know what to do and because we all live with some kind of fear. What should I do? How do I talk to the person? Does it do any good to visit? Will I get this disease? All uncomfortable thoughts. All normal thoughts.

This bible reading begins with Jesus having come back from Gentile territory. It is weird that he has gone there. Weird things have happened there. He has healed a man beset by demons who was living on the outskirts of his community. The man's illness terrified everyone. Jesus drives the demons out into 2000 pigs, no less. After this powerful act of reconnecting the man to health, to God and to his community, Jesus gets into his boat with his disciples to go back to Jewish territory. The man tries to jump in the boat with him, but Jesus drives him out saying 'Reconnect. Go. Tell of your experience.'

Jesus is no sooner back into Jewish territory than a leader of the synagogue, falls at the feet of this itinerant rabbi, Jesus, in desperation. His twelve year old daughter is unconscious and about to die. Jesus, says Sure. I will come. No problem. Time is of the essence, so they hurry off. But, then a woman who has vaginally haemorrhaged for 12 years makes a bold move and interrupts their journey of urgency. For twelve years she has been exiled from the community because of this impurity. For twelve years, she could touch no Jewish male, including her sons or her husband. For twelve years she spent ALL of her money on doctors. She is impoverished. However, she believes in this rabbi, Jesus. She stealthily approaches him and just touches the fringe of his cloak. She believes in Jesus so much that she does not even think she needs a laying on of his hands or big pronouncements or pigs running off into the ocean. She thinks if I but touch the fringe of his garment, I will be healed....and she was! Whoosh, some power goes out of Jesus, into her and she feels, she knows that she is restored. Jesus stops. He feels it. He knows the space time continuum has been altered. Who has touched him, seeking this power, this energy, this force for restoration? He asks the question. Everyone looks around. I can only imagine Jairus – poster boy for the Cosmic Emotional Index. If he had a watch, he would have desperately looking at it, tapping at it. What?! The man is stopping to ask this ridiculous question. No respecter of the Cosmic Emotional Index, Jesus knows that healing is not just about physical changes. In fact, that is the least important aspect of healing. Those of you who are doctors, nurses, social workers, you know this. Jesus understands that restoration, wholeness, connection, good relationships are the centre and the round of healing. So he knows this woman can not remain unaddressed. She 'fesses up. She is fearful. What will happen since she has stolen some of his healing power? Jesus, source of abundant constant in-pouring and outpouring of divine power, blesses her and claims her as daughter.

Then there is Jairus. People come to tell him his daughter is dead. Jesus says, "Do not fear, only believe." People laugh at Jesus when he checks her out and says she was only sleeping. He goes, takes the girl by the hand and says "*Talitha cum*" "Little Girl get up!" And she does. He tells her family to give her something to eat. Restoration to community, to life, to wholeness always culminates in a meal together.

A little girl who was not even conscious that she was in peril, although she had many, many people around who were afraid for her - praying and hoping and caring for her. An older woman, whom nobody would touch and who had no status except in the eyes of the man Jesus and in the heart of the One who sent him. Restored to community, both of them.

We have just recently lost Marg MacKinnon to Alzheimers. What I admired about Neil and Barb, her siblings, is that they insisted on taking her to church, even when her disease progressed such that Marg did not necessarily know she was in church and

she found it difficult to stay still for very long. We devised it such that she had a little bag of things she found interesting to pour through, to take out and admire. This speaks well of you as a community. Neil and Barb had confidence that they could and should take Marg to her place of worship, her community of worship, even though, in many ways, the Marg we knew being buried deep, like that unconscious little girl. You surrounded her with care, with tolerance, with acceptance. That kind of inclusion of the different, of the disruptive changes a community. It expands a community's humanity and it expands our own individual acceptance of our own frailty and our own worthiness of being loved, no matter what. As a Christian ethic, it is profoundly counter cultural. There have been other families who have taken their loved one to church and you have surrounded them with love, tolerance and care. There are the Dunbracks. I think also of Doug MacNaughton and the incredible support that the choir gave him, even when he could no longer sing or hold a hymn book – his place in the choir was there for him. Most choirs I know would not have done that – seeing the act of singing as the primary service to God. For you to see that the act of inclusion of the singer who could no longer physically sing but for whom the song of God still lay deep within him speaks of the very power of Christ within community.

The families of loved ones who have dementia are often like Jairus, especially in the beginning. No stone is unturned in seeking to bring that person to consciousness to healing, back to being the one they knew. No one can underestimate the suffering involved for those who watch and who love. Some families reach out for hems in desperate search of physical healing. Whatever we understand about these miracle stories, however we might want to explain them, sanitize them, we only know a couple of things. The early community understood that Jesus was fully filled with the power of God and that this power, overflowing healed and restored and **that illness is against the will of God. Isolation from community is against the will of God. Jesus always acted against these things.** What we also understand is that Jesus also taught us in his life and with his words that God is fully present, suffering with us. Weeping when we weep, despairing when we despair. Rejoicing when healing happens, rejoicing when community is expanded, when relationships are restored.

Sometimes people wonder why we should bother visiting someone with Alzheimers or dementia. "The person doesn't remember that you were there," they say. Normal, logical response. However, the great gift that Marg and Doug teach us is that it is enough to live in the day. The fact that you are present with that person, bringing company, bringing conversation, listening, caring, laughing, drying tears, calming, for that moment in time, is enough. We are a culture that absolutely is frantic, living out the embodiment of the Cosmic Emotional Index. We live in any place but the present in our culture. Next week, last week, next year, last year anywhere but here and now. People, who live with dementia, live here and live now and God loves them infinitely, as they are. When you hear that same story for the 37th time within the last hour, for that person, it was like the first time, every time and you have given them that gift. The gift of presence, the gift of inclusion in basic humanity – an agent of healing in a society that considers such folks outside the pale, of no use in the economic equation. By being there and not trying to fix them, correct them, by just being in that present moment you have given the gift of Christ, the gift of loving presence. In doing so they gift you - preciously.

In terms of healing, the question must be asked, what is “real”? Madge Midgley, who writes about poetry and science said, “What is more real, teeth or a tooth ache”? There might be miracles in our time. Our science, rationalistic minds just may not recognize them. If the healings of Jesus are about restoration to community, reconnection with God, inclusion in love, then these things are not beyond the work of God in our time through us. Barb McKinnon told me about one of the most precious things that happened in the weeks prior to Margie’s death. Marg’s Alzheimers had progressed to the point where she had lost the ability to move her body around, to eat by herself and had lost all capacity for speech and for understanding speech. Yet, in the week before she died, Marg turned to Barb, looked at her, directly meeting her eyes and said, “I love you.”

...Jesus said to the woman, “Daughter, your faith has made you well, go in peace and be healed of your disease.” Jesus took the girl by the hand and said to her, “*Talitha cum!*”