

Little Ones
Pentecost 18, Year B
Psalm 124, Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22
James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-40
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It all started with an argument—it often starts with an argument—about who’s the greatest; who’s first; who’s right?

Jesus will have none of it. You want to be first, he says, put yourself last and serve others (Mark 9:35).

But he doesn’t leave it there; he never just leaves it there.

He draws a little child into his arms and goes a step further: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes...the One who sent me” (Mark 9:37).

The disciples don’t fully understand—do they think he’s speaking only of children?—John tells Jesus about a man whom the disciples not only didn’t welcome but whom they try to hinder: “Teacher,” John says to Jesus, “we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us” (Mark 9:38).

John assumes that Jesus will approve, perhaps even praise the disciples for their boldness, but to their surprise, he tells them they’ll do no such thing—“You’ll do no such thing,” my mother used to tell me; anyone else ever hear those words?

“Do not stop him,” Jesus says, “for [anyone] who does a deed of power in my name...is not against us [but] for us.” (Mark 9:39-40a).

Jesus wants his disciples not only to welcome others in his name but, conversely, not to impede anyone from doing powerful deeds in his name, even if the motives of such a person are disingenuous. If someone gives you “a cup of water to drink,” to springboard off Mark’s example, the water is no less nourishing if the server’s character is questionable.

This point in mind, Jesus returns to the sweet image of a child on his lap and leaps from there to the horrifying image of a person with “a great millstone...hung around his neck...and thrown into the sea” (Mark 9:42b). Why does Jesus make such a drastic leap: from wrapping his arms around a sweet little child to tying a great stone around someone’s neck? To make perfectly clear his deep

concern for the most vulnerable among us and his judgement of any who would “put a stumbling block before [them]” (Mark 9:42a).

The best option for any who cause “little ones” to stumble is gruesome: to lop off a hand or a foot or to pluck out an eye if they cause others harm, for, according to the Gospel of Mark, “it is better for you to enter life maimed [and lame] than to have two hands [and two feet] and...be thrown into hell...where...the fire is never quenched” (Mark 9:45-48).

No wonder the great satirist, Mark Twain, told us to “go to Heaven for the climate [and to] Hell for the company.”

He has a point: who wants to hobble around with a bunch of fellow guilt-ridden amputees even if you’re in a climate-controlled heaven?

Who wants to be reminded that we’re hobbled—and we’re all of us hobbled in some way or another.

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Despite our “hobbled-ness,” though, we have great power, which our scripture readings make plain: the power to welcome others in the Spirit of Christ but also the power to cause the most vulnerable among us to stumble.

I can think of no baser example of the latter than the current case against eighteen-year-old Michelle Carter, who is facing involuntary manslaughter charges for pressuring a fellow teen to take his life.

According to prosecutors, Carter repeatedly asked the teen in texts messages, “When are you doing it?” and complained in one of the more than 1,000 texts the two teens shared: “You always say you’re gonna do it, but you never do.”

She wrote that she was tired of his “excuses” and, in one of her final texts, expressed, “I just want to make sure tonight is the real thing.” When the boy said he was afraid and didn’t want to abandon his family, Carter told him to climb back into his exhaust-filled truck. “Get back in,” she told him.ⁱ

The situation is all the more heinous when you realize that Carter was his girlfriend. She was supposed to care for and protect him, encourage him to get the help he so obviously needed, but instead she exploited his vulnerability. Why I can’t begin to understand or explain.

But I'll tell you this: the gospel message with its millstone doesn't sound so harsh in light of stories such as this.

The Good News, thank God, is that we humans also have great power to heal, and we often use it for just this purpose.

Consider how Queen Esther used her power for good by boldly asking the King to save the lives of her people, fellow Jews, who were being sold into slavery and killed (7:4). Speaking up could have cost her her life—women were not supposed to ask for anything of the king, not even the question, and if they did, they might be put to death—but she took the risk because she knew she was in a position to help.

Not only was she queen, but she was smart; she appealed to the king's sense of pride and honor, implying that not only were *her* people being destroyed but the king's reputation was being damaged for his having allowed, even unknowingly, an enemy to sell a subset of his kingdom into slavery (7:5a).

The king is incensed: "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" (7:5b)

Haman, she says: wicked Haman, the king's right-hand men.

The king's judgement against him is swift: he is to be hanged by "the very gallows that Haman [had] prepared for Mordecai," Esther's cousin, who was only ever faithful and loyal to the king (7:9).

Esther recognized her power and was bold and smart in asking the king to protect "the least of these," a metaphor for the most vulnerable among us.

James, in today's epistle lesson, goes a step further than Esther; he boldly states that anyone has the power to do great things when they "pray...in the name of the Lord": "the prayer of faith," he writes, "will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven" (5:15).

Up to this point, I've been more-or-less amen-ing right along with the scriptures; here, however, is where I get stuck.

Last week in our faith class the question was raised: if I pray for someone who is sick, and he or she isn't healed, is my faith weak?

My gut response is no.

The past couple months I've been lifting up prayers for our dear friend and former neighbor, Anita Powell, who in late June was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. This past week my mom and I drove to NC for her funeral. She was only 58, and while I know none of us is guaranteed a "long life," I somehow feel gipped if my loved ones don't make it until at least 90.

Was our faith insufficient? If we had prayed more, would God have saved her? Did the priest who officiated her service really believe that "Anita had finished her work on earth, and so God called her home?" Would her husband Dave have agreed?

Liam has been curious about death, and so we've told him that "when a person gets really really old" he or she passes on. We've never spoken about illness or other tragedies. And so, I guess it shouldn't have surprised me the other day when he told me, "I don't want to get bigger, Mommy, and die."

His point is uncomfortable and moving: none of us by our faith or by our prayers can *ultimately* save the life of anyone; we are mortal. Even the great evangelist and man of faith, Billy Graham, said, "I am not going to Heaven because I have preached to great crowds or [have] read the Bible many times; I'm going to Heaven just like the thief on the cross who said in that last moment: 'Lord, remember me.'"

To act as though we can ultimately save our own life or another's is contrary to the gospel's fundamental message that we are saved by God's grace. And if we begin to argue, but what about the Apostle's Paul's message that we're saved by faith, then hear me out:

We are saved by our faith that *Jesus* saves, not by how great our individual faith and prayers might be or look or sound. We are saved by our faith that *Jesus* saves.

And yet, to act as though, in the name of Jesus and by our faith, we don't have great power to heal is a gross understatement; the healing just doesn't always come in the ways we'd like. Healing, implies James, comes by "confessing our sins to and praying for one another" (5:16a).

Here James throws in a line about "the prayer of the righteous being powerful and effective" (5:16b), but before we jump on the *if-only-I-were-more-righteous* train, remember: there is only one among us who is truly righteous, and he told us that to be great we needed to be least and the servant of all.

"I am not going to Heaven," says Billy Graham, "because I have preached to great crowds or [have] read the Bible many times; I'm going to Heaven just like the thief on the cross who said in that last moment: 'Lord, remember me.'"

"Confess your sins," said James, "and pray for one another;" through these, healing comes.

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A minister was preaching on the importance of confession of sin and, wherever possible, of restitution. After the sermon a young man came up to him and said: "Pastor, I have wronged another and am ashamed to confess it or try to put it right. I am a boat builder, and the man I work for is an unbeliever. I have talked to him often about his need of Christ and have urged him to come and hear you preach, but he ridicules it all.

"In my work, copper nails are used because they do not rust in the water, but they are quite expensive, so I had been carrying home quantities of them to use on a boat I am building in my back yard." The pastor's sermon had brought him face to face the fact that he was just a common thief. "But," he said, "I cannot go to my boss and tell him what I have done, or offer to pay for those I have used. If I do he will think I am just a hypocrite, and yet those copper nails are digging into my conscience, and I know I shall never have peace until I put this matter right."

One night he came again to Dr. Marsh and exclaimed, "Pastor, I've settled for the copper nails, and my conscience is relieved at last."

"What happened when you confessed?" asked the pastor.

"He looked me squarely in the eye and said, 'George, I always did think you were a hypocrite, but now I'm beginning to feel there's something in this Christianity after all.'"ⁱⁱ

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Confessing our sins equalizes us; none of us gets to be the greatest or the least—a Christian or an unbeliever or a hypocrite—when we all hobble into the arena and lay our limbs on the table.

And praying for one another heals us by increasing our compassion. As Pope Francis wisely said, "Are you angry with someone? Pray for that person." Prayer is an avenue to healing if not between you and another then between you and your own self.

May we welcome the most vulnerable among us in the name of Christ; may we do everything in our power not to cause them to stumble; may we do everything in our power to help them heal; may we confess our sins to each other when we miss the mark; may we pray for each other always.

"Our help is in the name of the Lord" (124:8); in the name of the Lord—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—we pray. Amen.

ⁱ Miller, Michael E. "Michelle Carter Can Face Manslaughter Charge for Allegedly Encouraging Boyfriend's Suicide, Judge Rules." *Washington Post*. 24 September 2015.

ⁱⁱ Wilson, Larry. "A Religion Worth Having." *Sermon Central*. August 2011.