

**“Healing Through Jesus’ Hands ~ and Ours!”**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany Sermon~ by Sharon Larson**

At first glance or casual hearing, do today’s Scripture Readings seem an oddly paired couple? In a few moments time in this church we jump start from Old to New Testament and apparently juxtapose the universally recognizable figure, a watchword of afflicted WOE, in the person of Job with the quintessential, iconic Miracle Worker, in the person Jesus Christ Superstar. How are these two men, and the passages that succinctly relate bits of their stories to us this morning, related? And what is their relevance to this present moment in our crises-heaped, human history? Let’s see...

Perhaps we do well to initially consider that in the liturgical order of things as observed in many mainline Christian churches, there’s been a systematic buildup of Scripture Readings since Epiphany and this morning’s meeting of the two tales and two men aren’t as startling as might initially appear. In fact, both stories and their stars- one dim and discouraged, the other dazzling and determined, are bound in both earth and eternity by the enigmatic LOVE of GOD. How so? Incredibly, through the bondage of human suffering and divine deliverance from affliction that is ultimately Mysteriously manifest.

Job is afflicted. That is what we must crucially come to grips with no matter our natural aversion to his condition. As French philosopher Simone Weil confronts that state in comparison to simple suffering, “affliction” is utterly, irreducibly apart; she says, “it is a thing that takes possession of the soul and marks it through and through with its own particular mark, the mark of slavery. Something inseparable from physical suffering, yet quite distinct in that affliction is far more- it is an uprooting of life in all its parts-social, psychological and physical- an attenuated equivalent of death. The aspect of social degradation, or fear of it in one or another form, is a hallmark of affliction. Hence, our instinctive shuddering, or shunning of someone who is afflicted- for after all, that person may have endured a kind of marrow-deep mutilation that leave the majority of such incapable thereafter of caring for helping another or even being helped. Weil insists that COMPASSION for the afflicted is a natural impossibility; therefore, “IF it IS truly found, we are confronted with a more astonishing MIRACLE than walking on water, healing the sick or even raising the dead.” She conclusively presses the point by reminding us that it was just this condition of affliction that constrained Jesus Christ to implore in that Gethsemane garden night of anguish that he might be spared; he sought human consolation that wasn’t there when the disciples first slept and later fled in terror; he tortuously hung on the cross and cried out the belief that he was forsaken by God his Father. **There in that instance on the cross, Christ was made a curse for us; even in the abandonment Christ believes he is left in does not cause him to stop loving his Father perfectly, for they are the same Love- God and his Son.**

Recently NPR announced the death of Pulitzer Prizewinning playwright, Archibald MacLeish, whose modern dramatization of Job, *JB*, illuminated Broadway for a decade or more and lit up such lesser stages across the country as CTS in Indianapolis, IN, where CUMC's Rev. Steve Miller was an aspiring seminarian who acted the role of Zuss (word play on the Greek god Zeus.) This contemporary version—a complex play-within-a play, is set in a looming, dark circus tent. In a dialogue between JB (a wealthy businessman), Zuss (God), and Nickles (Old Nick, or the Devil) plus some second-rate clowns who epitomize the Biblical Job's taunting, false friends, the audience is presented with JB's suffering, physical pain, mental anguish, and a searing spiritual misery through which he yet searches for justification. Can we then believe that the central theme is still love? Dr. Alfred R. Edyvean, who starred as JB and was a mentor to many of us at CTS, said of this play's theme in his book, *This Dramatic World*, that through ALL of the suffering and, yes, even affliction, "the central idea MacLeish asserts is love – a human love that cares for God in spite of everything, and a love of life in spite of life. That man's ability to love is more important than anything we can conjecture about God; God's ways are not justified by man." Ah, but wait, is MacLeish's word the definitive one? ***Are not the man and woman ALIVE in Christ's Resurrected Body, indeed, called constantly "to justify, to show the truth," (by the Oxford Dictionary definition of the verb, "justify") in this case of God's Love, through the everyday's large and small actions of our hearts, minds and hands?***

In today's Gospel we find Jesus leaving the synagogue in the company of James and John trekking (how many miles?) to the home of Simon and Andrew where Simon's mother-in-law lay abed with some manner of fever. We do well to footnote that it was in this (same?) afore-mentioned Capernaum synagogue that Jesus had "amazed the people assembled on that Sabbath with his teaching, as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law." He'd performed a healing, had driven the "evil spirit" out of a man possessed. Many unknown, frightening, often fatal illnesses in that ancient time were lumped together and labeled evil spirited; but no matter what the malady's specific cause, that man was cured. Those who witnessed this event rapidly spread the word-of-mouth. Jesus must have been weary and wanting a respite when he went from that clamorous, synagogue scene to Simon's house, but any expectation of personal "R & R" down-time went immediately down-the-drain when he entered the door. His erstwhile hostess was flat-on-her back ~ but not for long. We aren't privy to Jesus' bedside manner; only that he ***took her hand and helped her up.*** Fever be gone, she began to wait on them (ever the woman's way.)

Of course, the word spread like wildfire and the whole town turned out that night with all the sick and demon-haunted people who could be herded outside the doorway of Simon's house. No wonder that he was exhausted in the predawn darkness and left the house determined to seek a solitary place of prayer (and perhaps as one monk used to call a short rest a "horizontal meditation" as well?) Hot on the trail, Simon & the

disciples soon found him and told Jesus he was being pursued by a crowd. Jesus didn't duck the responsibility of his greater mission, merely redirected and enlarged its scope, explaining that it was imperative that he preach elsewhere- throughout Galilee-for that was essentially ***"WHY he had come!"***

**Why are we come?** Prime Minister (Sir) William Pitt told his lifelong friend, William Wilberforce, MP, "If you make the world better in one way, you make it better every way." Wilberforce's wife, Barbara Spooner, encouraged her husband with this wisdom, "When people stop being afraid, they rediscover their compassion." Rev. John Newton, former slave ship captain & author of the hymn Amazing Grace, confidently assured a conflicted Wilberforce that there was no separation in his religious duty to God and that of his political duty as a Member of Parliament in these words: "I believe Distinctly who called you to it can afford you strength according to your day, and I trust He will, for He is faithful to His promise." Newton gave Wilberforce many Scriptural examples to shore up, guide and animate him in the line of his political duty –"but especially to keep (you) in the habit of dependence upon God, and communion with him, in the midst of all the changes, bustle around (you.)" Those vastly understated "changes and bustle" became thirty, interminably long years of embattled Parliamentary challenges that literally changed the course of Western civilization and brought about the outlawing of slave trade throughout the British Empire barely three days before this giant Christian Reformer and Great Man ( who measured only 4'11" tall) died. Did he do it alone? Absolutely not. In addition to the loving wife was truly the Holy Spirit-filled 'wind in his sails' (and the words wind, spirit, & breath in Hebrew and Greek are originally in the feminine tense) Wilberforce worked with a group of "well-heeled, well-connected" men and women who comprised the Clapham Sect; they assiduously contributed their individual and collective wealth of talents, time and treasure to a concerted campaign of national reform. Were all of Wilberforce's supporters upper crust? No way. The anti-slavery public campaign he & his circle of friends initiated was unprecedented in English history and of a magnitude that staggers even we modern computer junkies. By the time their hand-written on a parchment roll petition to abolish slavery was delivered to the House of Commons in 1814, it carried one million signatures- one tenth of the entire British, predominantly 'commoner' population! But make no mistake about it, Wilberforce was that amazing triumph's central heart, soul, energy, and clear champion.

Is there a hidden key to a secret door of William Wilberforce's faith? Scores of his associates declared that it was – are you ready?- **JOY!** Repeatedly in the written accounts of his contemporaries there are testimonies to his "child-like, child-loving, self-forgetting joy in Christ"... "that joy was the penetrating prevailing feature of his mind"... a lively sense of humor and delight"... "springing from entireness of trust in the Savior's merits and from love to God and humanity." And the effect of this mentally healthy, self-forgetting joy sparked his ability to see all the good in this world- along with those

colossally dark, deathly shortcomings which demanded change in the name of justice, morality, and culture- instead of being eaten alive by one's problems even when they were of humongous proportion! My NIV Study Bible Concordance lists something over 200 passages contextually citing JOY. There we have it, don't we? Aren't there just as many- maybe more, multiplied injustices, immoralities, and cultural dissolutions that cry out to be rectified NOW as in the 18<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> Century? – In this country only last month 598,000 people lost their jobs; worldwide there's monetary meltdown. What will we do about all that?... even before climate change becomes irreversible, technology's 'virtual reality' fools most of the increasingly robotic, play-obsessed, population all of the time, and nuclear warfare finally obliterates human life on this planet? Ken Wales, Producer of the film, *Amazing Grace* effectively asks his audience: "What will we choose to do with the gifts of our lives? Will we defy the odds and confront the world's injustices, or choose mediocrity because it is easier than reaching for greatness?" This 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany's musing message will end with two *enlightenments*: "***Of all things, guard against neglecting God in the secret place of prayer***" (William Wilberforce's- and Jesus' example); then this: "***Nothing on earth is so thrilling, so terrifying, as the power of the human hands to keep us or mar us. All that man does is the hand manifest, creating and destroying, itself the interest of order and demolition. It moves a stone, and the universe undergoes a readjustment. It breaks a clod, and a new beauty bursts forth in fruits and flowers, and the sea of fertility flows over the desert***" (blind,deaf Helen Keller's illumination.) So, shall we begin again and evermore to take courage, take joy, and labor together with the connection of our minds, hearts, and hands, as members of Christ's Body for the Love of God and Humanity as long as life on this dear earth endures? *Yes! Amen! and Alleluia!*

*In Christ-Love, Sharon Murphy Larson, February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009*

### **References:**

Scripture quotes from both: *NIV Study Bible & The Jerusalem Bible*  
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*The Amazing Grace of Freedom: The Inspiring Faith of William Wilberforce, The Slaves' Champion*, Ken & Susan Wales & Ted Bauer, 2007, New Leaf Press, USA