

“A Deserted Place”
A homily for the people of St. Nicholas by
Ethan Alexander Jewett
8 February 2009

Isaiah 40:21-31 + Psalm 147:1-11, 20c + I Corinthians 9:16-23 + Mark 1:29-39

“In the morning, while it was still dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” This is the most poignant sentence in today’s Gospel for me, striking a deep emotional chord that resonates with my own journey and struggles as a Christian. Much of Epiphany is spent focusing on the miraculous healing stories of Jesus, as proof of his divinity. I am moved, though, by the tender evidence of our Savior’s fragile humanity, which underpins his acts of healing.

Anyone who has spent countless hours by the bed of a friend or family member dying in the hospital knows how exhausting it is. As much as we may feel the rightness of our being there, and the healing power of our support, we can leave the room feeling drained or depressed. I am often potently aware of my own powerlessness. I remember spending time with Marge Boccio and her family in the hospital shortly before Marge’s death. Much to my surprise, I defaulted unthinkingly to my “Chuckles-the-Clown” routine, cracking jokes left and right and acting like a complete goon. After I left the hospital, I thought I must have looked like such an idiot, a particularly insensitive idiot, considering Marge’s prognosis. Others had been to see Marge and had given her communion, prayed with her, and done all the serious and seemly things you’re supposed to do with the dying. I wished my last moments with her would’ve been more meaningful. It occurred to me later, though, that perhaps my yucking it up was healing, too, in its own goofy way, by cheering everybody up and making them laugh. But, at the time, I left the room feeling useless and exhausted.

Memories of these moments with Marge, and similar ones with Carmen McCall and Kenny Marx, make me understand Jesus' retreat to a deserted place in a specific way. While I wouldn't trade these holy and purposeful moments in the hospital for anything, it does remind me how indispensable it is for anyone engaged in healing work to have a healthy prayer life. I remember Steve advising me after my first pastoral care visit, which was quite difficult, to do something to restore and cleanse myself. I burned incense, prayed, took a shower, and went to the gym. It helped. Healing requires a lot of the healer, and it is important to find that deserted place to re-center ourselves and seek God's restorative power. Jesus' own retreat to pray reminds us that self-care is part and parcel of healing others.

It's too bad the Bible is silent on the details surrounding Jesus' private moments with the Creator, but then again, they're private. Nonetheless, I can imagine the very human Jesus fatigued, even after a good-night's sleep, from all the demands placed upon him by the lepers, blind, and possessed. The needs are great, and everyone wants a piece of him. He gets up before dawn and steels himself for the hard work ahead. He must've felt so inadequate. He calls upon God to give him the strength to go from village to village healing the sick, disciples and strangers buzzing around him all day, not giving him a moment's rest. He prays for patience and compassion, he asks for freedom from frustration and anger. Perhaps he even remembered the words of today's reading from Isaiah, "He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless." Anyone who's done healing work—nurses, doctors, or spiritual healers—has no doubt felt faint and powerless at times.

I'm raising this concern this week, because I am aware how much the need for healing has increased because of the current economic crisis, both in our communities and our congregation. We're going to need to be truly available to each other now more than ever, and that will require more of us to give more of

ourselves to helping each other through these difficult times. It may take the form of a conversation with a struggling friend, a compassionate hug, an overwhelmingly joyful smile, or a more intensive commitment; and while, regrettably, we can't respond to every need out there, The Gospel calls upon us to do what we can. As Paul says, we are entrusted with a commission.

In adverse circumstances, it is easy to ignore our inner lives as the physical and financial demands of our outer lives come at us from all directions. Jesus understood this well, and modeled for us a way to stay grounded and healthy in the midst of all this tumult. We, too, must find our deserted place. That will likely look different for each of us, but the general goal is to bring ourselves into balance. So many discussions about religion recently have focused on right beliefs and correct theology, largely intellectualizing, what is supposed to be, at heart, a direct, emotional and spiritual experience of God. In seeking that deserted place, it is important to pay attention to the movements of the heart and soul that show we are being nourished.

The other danger of troubling times is to retreat into selfish self-preservation, and neglect the bonds of community. Yet it is in moments of crisis when these bonds are especially critical. When we as individuals feel weak, the strength of the community—family, church, neighbors—can be a vital support system, but that requires us to be generous. At St. Nicholas, we will need to be extravagant in our generosity to both our fellow parishioners and newcomers, particularly as economic stressors intensify and we continue to grow in numbers. That can be hard work. It means letting go of our turf and sacred cows and just going with the flow. It means not lashing out, when we feel hurt or threatened. It means finding joy in the fact that someone else is belonging. It also requires a renewed commitment to listening and making space for the stranger to lead and deploy her unique gifts.

In many ways these are dark days, but they are instructive in reminding us that skillful healers draw strength from their own woundedness. No doubt the myriad troubles of our lives will make us susceptible to moments of weakness, but it may be these places of weakness that enable us to be successful in healing each other and those that walk through our doors for the first time. Jesus' greatness as a healer was an awareness of his own fragility and his need for strength from a source greater than himself. Surviving our own brokenness enable us to help others to survive these same wounds. May we all help each other to locate a deserted place to pray, that we may go out into the world to heal it.

Amen.