Pentecost
Cycle C, 6.9.19

**SIGNS OF THE SPIRIT – WOUNDED HEALERS**

Where do you find the Spirit of the Risen Lord at work in our world bringing new life, energy and enthusiasm, as the disciples experienced on that first Pentecost? I think the signs of the Holy Spirit are everywhere to be found and I wanted today to share three signs or stories that gave me insight into today’s gospel.

The first story is about BJ Miller. He’s a medical doctor and the director of a hospice project in San Francisco, as well as a palliative care specialist at UCSF Medical Center. He deals with dying patients and people who experience a great deal of pain. He’s also a co-founder of a tea company and owns a farm in Utah. He married a few years ago. His skills and accomplishments are impressive, especially because he’s a triple amputee.

As a college sophomore at Princeton, he and a couple buddies from his crew team were walking to a convenience store, when they decided to climb an electrified shuttle train on the campus. He got too close to the power source and the 11,000 volts of electricity arced to his metal watch, causing an explosion that required his left arm to be amputated below the elbow and both legs amputated below the knees. After several months of recuperating he resolutely returned to Princeton and graduated with his class. After several different jobs, Dr. Miller – BJ – decided to pursue medicine, specifically the field of palliative care which treats the symptoms of illness to relieve pain and suffering of a patient. One of his supervising doctors said of him: *BJ is an extraordinary physician. Perhaps the best I’ve ever seen at understanding the pain and suffering of others, bearing witness to it and helping people to face it and begin to heal. The most remarkable part is that BJ is filled with joy and humor.* This doctor’s story is remarkable but what struck me, and what drew my attention to a connection with today’s gospel, was something that he did after a few years of living with his situation. He used to put a sock over his left arm, the amputated arm, because he thought it was grotesque, and he wore flesh-colored foam covers over his prosthetic legs to make them look as close to real as they could. But after a while he stopped his attempts at concealment. These prostheses were a part of him and he no longer felt the need to hide his vulnerability. Through it there is a small opening to reach into other people, and he thrives on that intimacy which enriches his life and brings healing to others who are suffering or in pain.

Did you notice the small detail in the resurrection appearance of Jesus in John’s gospel? Before he breathed on the apostles and imparted his Spirit, it says: *He showed them his hands and his side* – the place of the nails that held him to the cross and the soldier’s lance that pierced him. Doesn’t it
seem odd, even cruel to focus on the wounds of Jesus? After all, the resurrection took all that away. Why remind the disciples of those terrible events that led to Jesus’ death on the cross? Precisely because it was through those wounds that healing can be offered to those who would follow Jesus. Our Messiah is not a distant God, unable to understand our struggles and shortcomings, but one who walks with us through our darkest nights and most devastating disappointments.

The second story of Pentecost power is about one of my favorite Bay area musicians — Wesla Whitfield, who, sadly, died a few months ago. I’ve been listening to her singing and attending her concerts ever since I moved to the Bay area over thirty years ago. Her repertoire is the Great American Songbook, music I love — the songs of Cole Porter, Irving Berlin and Rodgers and Hart, timeless melodies with lilting lyrics. Each song tells a story and Wesla really was a singing storyteller.

When I first started attending her concerts, Wesla’s accompanist — who was also her adoring husband — would play a warm-up set with piano, drums and bass. Then, the lights would dim, the stage would go dark and her husband would carry her out in the dark and set her on a tall stool next to the piano for her performance. You see, Ms. Whitfield was a paraplegic. Walking home from a rehearsal session in San Francisco at the age of 29, she was caught in the midst of a random shooting that left her paralyzed from the waist down. Whitfield says she came to understand that the only thing she had lost in this unfortunate event was the ability to walk, and that in fact she was still possessed of her most valuable asset — her mind. Wasn’t she angry about what she had lost? She says, “I knew early on that anger would only make things harder for me.” Her positive, can-do approach to life was evident in her warm smile, gracious style and pure voice. I walk away feeling renewed every time I hear her voice.

Then, one year on Valentine’s Day I went with some friends to a Wesla concert at the Soda Center at St. Mary’s College. She came out this time, not carried in the arms of her husband, but in her wheelchair. She said it was time to do a show with what she was most comfortable with, as she spun around the stage in her streamlined chair, and that there was no need to hide from the fact or hide others from the fact that her wheelchair was her daily companion. Wow! There was an honesty about her admission that night and it only enhanced an already fantastic artist. Again, I’m reminded of John’s gospel telling us that Jesus showed them his hands and his side. In the wounds of Jesus the disciples saw something of themselves — their own signs of what the cruelty of life had done to them, the times they were caught in enemy
crossfire. Just as Wesla came to grips with her own anger over life’s cruel turn of fate, the disciples, with Jesus’ leading the way, overcame their own fears and went out to proclaim the good news of resurrection and new life given them by the Spirit of Jesus.

And one last story of the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit. It was told to me by a parishioner a few years ago who hoped that I would find an opportunity to share it with others. She and her husband were going to Peet’s for coffee and they passed a man who was obviously a derelict, smelled horrible and had only one shoe on. Probably a homeless person, and as you know, we don’t have too many of those types in our community. We’re very uncomfortable with those types when they come around. Well, they went into Peet’s, ordered coffee and sat down. They could see the man outside the window at one of the outdoor café tables when someone they knew came up to talk to them. The woman who approached them saw the man outside and rolled her eyes, her arched brow indicating how obviously out of place she thought he was in Lafayette. Then, two young guys in their 20’s who also saw the man, took him a cup of coffee and a roll and sat down and talked with him for a while. When they got up to leave, one of the young men took off his shoes, bent down and removed the one beat-up shoe that the man was wearing and put his shoes on the man’s feet.

Our parishioner and her husband gasped with the breath of the Spirit over the expression of selfless love they had just witnessed. They left the coffee shop with a different perspective, a new understanding of how the wounds of one person can awaken the spirit of love and compassion in someone whose heart is open.

What about your own wounds? Do you cover them? Conceal them? Hide them? Or pretend there are none? Will your wounds destroy you? Or wake you up? Wake you up enough to see that they can be a source of healing for others as they open you to the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, fortitude, knowledge, piety, counsel, fear of the Lord. These are the gifts of the Spirit that come to us on Pentecost and anytime we unite our hearts with the power of the Risen Lord at work in us, bringing us new life, and impelling us to share that new life with others.

And, most of all, the gift of compassion for those who, like you and me, are all wounded – some in obvious and visible ways; some in ways we’ll never see or know. With Christ, our wounds no longer concealed but healed by God’s grace and power, we too can be wounded healers for others.

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