

The Serpent in the Wilderness

Sermon for Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 22 2009

Rev. Franklin E. Vilas, D.Min.

There is an image which emerges from our scripture lessons for today which has been a powerful symbol in our age—the symbol of the brazen serpent lifted up on the rod in the wilderness by Moses to heal the people of snakebite. It is reflective of the symbol of the Greek god Asclepius, where a serpent is entwined on a rod and symbolizes the healing profession. We often see this today in hospitals, on ambulances or on the license plates of physicians.

Jesus in the Gospel likens his impending fate on the cross to this healing symbol—and to the healing of humanity: “I, if I be lifted up, will lift all people to myself.” Thus, in the middle of the season of Lent are the collective healing dimensions of our faith placed before us, even as we move towards the Passion and crucifixion.

I have preached earlier at St. Mark’s about the role of prayer for healing in the Christian community and spoke of several physical healings I have experienced that almost seemed miraculous in nature. Within the context of Lent we are reminded that all healing does not occur in life, and that the ultimate healing lies beyond death.

There is one example that stands out in my memory and comes to mind during the season of Lent that I would share with you this morning, for it involves not only the power of the healing community, but also the final context of healing-- eternal life.

This occurred at St. Ann's Church in Brooklyn Heights, where I served as Rector for five years in the late 1970's. The Church had as one of its ministries St. Ann's Independent School-- now an institution of over 1,000 students-- then in its tenth year of existence. The head of the art department at St. Ann’s was a forty-year old artist named Willard Midgette. He was a gifted painter, whose commissioned works on American Indian life were part of the government exhibits during the country's bicentennial in 1976.

Willard did not attend our church, but his wife did. One day she came to me and told me that he was suffering from a cancerous tumor of the brain. He was losing control of his hands and losing vision as well. She knew of the healing services and asked for prayer. A small healing prayer group in our congregation began intensive intercession for him.

Willard was soon in the hospital, severely impaired. He was lying in despair one night when a Jamaican nurse asked him why he was so depressed. His response was "You'd be depressed too, if you were becoming a vegetable!". The nurse stretched out her hand to touch him and said "You will *not* become a vegetable!" The next morning, to his amazement, Willard found his eyesight better and his motor responses returning. The tumor shrank appreciably in the next few days, and he returned home.

I received a call from Willard's wife several days later saying that Willard wanted to see me. He could not understand what had happened to him, and was confused by it. But he knew that it had something to do with the Jamaican nurse and our praying congregation. I visited Willard and explained to him what I knew about the power of healing prayer. He asked to be baptized in the Church. This took place in the congregation, and Willard asked and began to attend the small group that met to study the healing ministry and pray for members of the congregation-- of whom he had been one.

Before his illness, Willard had begun a huge painting called "Navajo Pieta", depicting an ancient Indian woman kneeling on a highway in Arizona, illuminated by headlights and holding the body of her son-- a young man who had been hit by a truck. In the background is a beautiful Arizona sunset, and by the figures was a stop sign which had been ignored by the driver of the truck. Willard saw in this powerful painting the tragedy of Native Americans that he had experienced crossing the country to prepare for his works of art.

He insisted on donating this painting to St. Ann's Church. We decided to hang it in the sanctuary during Lent of that year, and I will never forget Willard standing in the pulpit at its dedication and thanking the congregation for bringing him to a faith in the living God. He had been near death a month before. In completing the painting, Willard had taken out the stop sign. Noting this, a psychiatrist who was a member of the healing group said to me-- "I think that Willard has prepared to walk into that sunset".

At the beginning of Lent that year, Willard's tumor began to grow again. The prayer group met with him in his home, and then as he weakened, around his bed. His faith was powerful and he faced death with equanimity. He thanked God for sparing him long enough to discover the reality of life in the Spirit. He died near Good Friday, with his friends and relatives around his bed. We joined hands and said a final Lord's Prayer for Willard as he moved to greater life.

I tell this story because it was one of the most powerful experiences of the congregation as a healing community that I have ever had. Willard brought to us not only the experience of physical healing, but also the knowledge that the greater healing is spiritual and transcends what we know as our physical death. I remember also what this did for our small group of parishioners who acted as elders in the healing ministry for Willard. No one-- including the psychiatrist-- was the same after that experience.

I would suggest that this story puts prayer for healing in its proper context. Intercessory prayer is not an attempt to force our will upon the Creator. It is, rather, an opening to the realm of the spirit which surrounds us, and which was brought to us in a vital way through the death and resurrection of the Christ. Jesus on the cross becomes the symbol of ultimate healing. When we gaze upon this mystery of the divine, self-giving love -- as the Hebrews gazed upon the brazen serpent in the wilderness with Moses, the poison of life is withdrawn and the spiritual wholeness we seek can become ours.

I do not think that it was just coincidence that our experience with Willard Midgette corresponded with the days of Lent in that special year. His funeral, which could have been an expression of

unmitigated tragedy, was instead a magnificent celebration of a vital artist who found his life transformed in meaning through the pain of illness, suffering and death.

That experience did not change the willingness of our small group at St. Anne's to pray for physical healing. But it put the ministry of healing for all of us in its proper context. We faced the reality that for all of us the end of life is death—but that in the Spirit of Christ even death falls before the ultimate wholeness that will be ours in the love of God.

This is the glorious message that shines through the words of Jesus even as he faced his last, painful struggle.

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.”