All Saints’ Church Proper 16

August 21, 2016 Year C

Isaiah 58: 9b-14 Hebrews 12:18-29

Psalm 103: 1-8 Luke 13:10-17

Let us pray in the name of the Living Lord, Amen.

“And just then there appeared a woman” in the synagogue, unnamed, crippled for eighteen years, with a spirit of weakness, bent over, unable to stand up straight.

Notice that she does not ask for healing- maybe because she is resigned, accustomed to her lot in life.

I can’t imagine straining to see the sun, the sky, the stars. I take for granted the beauty of the full moon which we have seen these last few nights- so very full and bright.

When Jesus, who was teaching at the time, sees her, he calls her over.

He first says, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” And then, secondly, he lays hands on her, violating all customs.

Jesus has been doing a lot of touching lately…. A leper, the widow Nain’s dead son, a woman hemorrhaging for twelve years.

Touching is unnecessary in light of Jesus’ ability to heal. Yet by his touch, he restores her back to the community; it’s not just a physical healing, but spiritual as well.

 She is no longer “unclean” from the inside out!

The leader of the synagogue doesn’t challenge Jesus, but tells everyone, “If you want to be healed, come any of the six days.”

He has a point. What’s one more day… it’s been eighteen years after all.

Jesus is not critiquing his legalistic mindset, but rather his sense of “us and them.”

What’s a day, unless it’s your mother, daughter, sister, neighbor….. then every minute counts.

Jesus calls her “Daughter of Abraham.” This unnamed woman is now family, set free from her bondage NOW.

This is what we mean when we say “Church is Family.” We are each other’s family.

My vacation was great, but it is so good to be back, connecting with you, my family, my church.

And it’s not been an easy week. George Kerr stopped by the office, saddened by the anniversary of his parents’ burial. Dick Hamlen’s wife, Bard, passed away this week. We just held her memorial service yesterday.

And I am in the midst of my own sadness. Members of my South African family, whom I have known for almost 30 years, and who are so important to me, Gideon, Nomsa and their three children Mazwie, Nondumiso and Nkonzo, just suffered one of the great losses in life.

Nkonzo, 32, in the prime of his life, was killed in a car accident. What’s worse is his death could have been avoided. The police at the scene of the accident and the hospital staff were not attentive in the right ways; in fact, there are concerns about gross negligence….. there was internal bleeding, undetected, and Nkonzo died of septic shock.

I think about people all over the world, who don’t have the privileges of our incredible standards of living….. excellent hospitals, clean water, access to education, peaceful streets, who are bent over by burdens of the precariousness of life’s absurdities and unfairness.

I’ve been calling by Skype all week- it’s amazing to be able to connect through cell towers deep into the villages of South Africa.

Friday afternoon, I had just finished the homily for Bard’s memorial service, and I called Nondumiso. It was about 11:00 pm their time.

“We are all here at mom’s. We are starting the Night Vigil.”

“What’s the Night Vigil?”

Friends, family, villagers, parishioners, all are coming to us, to read scripture, to pray, to sing, to say words of encouragement for us, to praise the beauty of Nkonzo’s life, to be with us. The community is fortifying us throughout the whole night so that we will have strength to bury my brother tomorrow morning. Can you hear the singing?”

I imagined Nondumiso holding up her phone, and yes I could hear the ululation…. That long wavering high pitched vocal sound, which almost resembles a howl, a lament, forlorn; a call formed by a trilling quality in the back of the throat…..

The sound gets me every time. I began to cry. “Oh, Nondumiso, let me give you words of encouragement.” And we began to talk about the beauty of her brother.

All week, I realize that I have been angry with God. I feel both a deep connection in that anger, and also righteous in it. I have every right to raise my fist to God. It actually feels good to vent and to be this angry.

During the week, I realize that there are places in the human heart which do not yet exist, and suffering enters into them so that they may have existence….. it’s a paradox, that can’t be resolved, but my heart is expanding. And maybe that’s the point of being a Christian. If one’s heart is not expanding, why bother?

Suffering is one of the keys to intimacy and love. We are all daughters and sons of Abraham, belonging always. And the ultimate reign of the Kingdom of God is where Jesus is…..and Jesus is always where suffering is.

It’s within the beauty of our church family that we can ask for healing, lifting up our burdens, sometimes through anger, and be touched by Jesus’ love.

Amen.