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“Praying with Our Feet”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
10th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

June 9, 2013

1 King 17:8–24; Psalm 146; Luke 7:11–17

Yesterday morning, I woke up at 5 a.m., donned a pink-ribbon T-shirt,
safety-pinned a race number to the front of it,
wrote “Carolyn,” my mother's name, on a pink celebration tag and pinned it to the back,
laced up my running shoes,
and drove over to the PNC Center in Raleigh
to catch the shuttle for Meredith College
to participate in the annual Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure.
I'm not a runner by nature; I'm just not built that way.
But every once in a while, there are some things worth running for,
and for me, this is one of them: a cure for breast cancer.
It is my connection to my mother, Carolyn; this is one thing that I can do to pry victory
from the jaws of the disease that caused her to suffer and die way too early.
You see, she presented with breast cancer when she was only 36:
endured a mastectomy, hysterectomy, and oophorectomy,
then recovered amazingly and lived abundantly for 13 years
before the cancer recurred at age 49 and took her life.
The Race for the Cure, which Hedge and I have walked or run almost every year hence
(except for last year, when I was mad at them)
is our opportunity *to pray with our feet*,
that this will never happen again to a wife and mother,
to young children who lose their mother,

to a husband who loses his wife,

or to parents who never imagine outliving their children.

It connects me to my mother, but it also connects me to people like Angelina Jolie,

who recently endured a preventive double mastectomy;

and it connects me to friends and members here who have struggled

or who are struggling with breast cancer and its sinister manifestations:

Kerry, Kristen, Anna, Margaret, Barbara, Mary Kay, JoAnne, Ann,

Carolyn, Sue, and others.

I apologize for outing you, ladies, and I also apologize for not outing you, if I don't know

you've had to live with this frightening affliction.

But we are connected by this strange disease that strikes women

at a place that should be life-giving, but yet becomes life-threatening.

And I hate it.... and I run from it.... and I run toward its demise...

and I pray with my feet that this might be the last Race for the Cure

that I'll ever have to run because a cure will have been found,

and death will be no more, and mourning and crying and pain will pass away,

as God has promised in the new heaven and new earth to come. (Rev. 21:1–4)

Yesterday, 15,000 people ran or walked in the Race for the Cure;

30,000 feet pounded the pavement, their percussive prayers beating

to beg the attention of Yahweh/God/Allah, the One who is wholly other.

It's amazing to be a part of that great throng of saints,

young and old, children, youth and parents, men and women,

who dream dreams and see visions of a day

when *this* will no longer be necessary.

One young man passed me in the race with a celebration tag on the back of his shirt

that said, "My mommy."

I especially love to see the women racing in burqas, these dark phantasmic figures,

covered from head to toe in black gauzy fabric,

but with fierce eyes showing and running shoes with pink laces

peeking out from beneath their gowns;

it is a reminder to me that we are all in this thing together,
that cancer and fear and death know no boundaries,
and neither should we.

Jew, Gentile, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, atheist, believer, non-believer—
all of us wanting to be made whole.

It *is* the tie that binds us all together as one: this heartfelt desire to be made whole,
this reverence for life.

Elijah is a prophet, neither God nor a son of God, but a human messenger of God,
who brings God's word to bear upon a particular earthly situation.

He has been dodging King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and their preferred god, Baal,
because he has dared to take a stand against their power
and the apparent power of their god,
and as part of *his* Moral Monday protest, he has declared drought
upon their land.

And so God directs him to cross over into Sidon—drought-stricken territory, enemy territory,
Jezebel's homeland—where he is to take residence with a poor widow and her son,
whom God promises will feed him.

In doing so, Elijah unknowingly carries the message of God's providence
beyond the boundaries of Israel, to a place most likely to resist God's abundant grace.

Upon arriving, Elijah sees a poor widow gathering sticks for firewood
and knows, surely, that she is destitute,

that she can barely put food on the table for her son and herself.

Yet, he asks her for drink and for food, as God has directed.

At first she balks at the notion of sharing from their meagerness, yet she relents,
and God performs a miracle of abundance that potentially will sustain their lives
until the famine subsides.

Potentially... and then, as if feeding an extra mouth were not enough financial strain,
enough destitution, enough desperation, the widow's son becomes ill—
so ill that there is "no breath left in him."

The text doesn't say that he dies, but that his illness is so severe
that he is not breathing on his own; he is in respiratory distress and
on the verge of death.

And in her despair, the widow rails at God's prophet
that he has brought disfavor and unwanted attention from his God upon her home,
at which point, *Elijah's own race for the cure begins* to save the life of this child,
to protect his own reputation, and to affirm the reputation of his God, Yahweh.
His feet move fast, his adrenaline rushing, his heart rate on the rise,
as he scoops the lad from his mother's arms, carries him upstairs in his arms
to his own bed, all the while lamenting loudly to Yahweh God
as he performs primitive CPR on the child,
lying on him three times as he implores Yahweh to intercede
on behalf of this child and save his life,
and to intercede on behalf of this widow and save her from being cut off
from all support by the death of her only remaining link to society.

And Yahweh hears the patter of Elijah's feet, the pounding of his heart,
his poignant, breathless pleas,
and shows compassion upon the child and his mother, by reviving the child.

The race to save and the grace to restore meet
in this moment of *God's ferocious compassion for the poorest of the poor,*
the ones with the most to lose,
and with the one who stands with them and for them,
who runs for their welfare and prays intercessory prayers on their behalf.

Last week, when I was on vacation near Asheville, I asked a retired surgeon there
what he, a physician, made of this story about a miraculous healing.

He scratched his head, didn't answer me immediately, said he'd have to
think about it overnight, and he'd give me an answer in the morning.

So, I asked him again in the morning, "What do we make of these miraculous
stories of healing in the Bible?"

And he answered, "God is full of surprises. Grace never comes as a deserved favor,

but rather comes as total surprise, sometimes to those who expect it the least. The hope is in the surprise," he said. "Therefore, we can never count it out.

Even when our best medical efforts fail,

God just might play the trump card," he added. "And so, we hope."

As Shakespeare suggests in a line from *Measure for Measure*,

"The miserable have no other medicine, but only hope" (Act 11, Sc. 4).

And Jesus, God with us, God for us, God's message in the flesh, finds himself in a situation similar to Elijah's... widow/widow, only son/only son/, risk of death/death.

As he enters the town of Nain, his large incoming band of followers

crosses paths with an equally large outgoing procession of mourners,

lamenting the death of a man and the grief of his widowed mother.

Their race is not for the cure, but to get the deceased in the ground within 24 hours.

The son has already died,

therefore, the sound of *their* feet is the soft shuffle of footsteps on tear-sodden soil.

Perhaps the Jesus crowd pulls over to the shoulder of the road,

as the funeral procession winds slowly past,

as we do in Durham, which is one thing I admire about people here—

the empathy and respect for those who grieve.

Or perhaps they are too preoccupied with their own issues to even notice

the sad procession on the other side of the road.

Nevertheless, Jesus spots this bereft widow within her crowd of mourners.

He, God with us, notices her weeping

and turns with God's ferocious compassion to address her.

He, who will one day weep over the unpreventable loss of his own friend Lazarus,

reaches out to this broken soul.

He, who is heart-bothered by people who lose anything of value,

be it sheep or coins or wayward sons, leaves his own familiar

procession to step into her strange entourage

and *suggests the impossible to her*, "Do not weep."

And Jesus touches the funeral bier, commands the dead son to rise,

and gives him back to his mother.

Life is renewed, community is restored, their future story resumes;
she will maintain a secure place in society.

Jesus' compassion is extended to the son who has died and to his mother who
also needed a way to stay alive as a widowed female in a patriarchal culture.

Jesus' compassion goes outside the boundaries of clean and proper,
to touch and heal the dead, and to interact with this unprotected widow.

To be made whole is one of our core desires as human beings, isn't it?

What parents would not sell everything they possess to obtain the wholeness of their child?

What child would not run the rubber off his or her shoes to win the wholeness of a parent?

What kind of God bends with compassion to hear the guttural lament of humanity
and to respond with the grace of new breath/new life?

Author Reynolds Price, who struggled for years with cancer and disability, says:

"In the years of my own confrontation with cancer, loss and chronic pain...

I experienced fairly steadily the sense of being witnessed and accompanied
almost always by what seemed God or a full-fledged messenger
of God...

And with that companionship, I was ultimately led back into a new and transformed
life and work." (Reynolds Price. *Letter To A Man In The Fire*, p. 72)

Is God's healing and transforming grace something we can work to garner to our favor?

Is it shown preferentially to some and not to others?

Is God's compassion random? Is it hit or miss?

I don't know, but I run towards it and I run for it because

these stories our tradition tells, these widow stories, these death to life stories,
carry power for me in their portrayal of a God in Christ who cares that we suffer,

who notices our weeping, who is prone to weep himself,

who turns in his tracks to respond to us,

who has the power to reverse the curse of disease and death,

and who, I believe, will one day turn it all on its head.

Concludes Reynolds Price: "Long acquaintance with the text and tenor of the Gospels convinces me that the God who permits the torture and agonized execution of Jesus on Passover *does literally restore life to him on Easter morning.*

That is, I believe that the resurrection of Jesus is in however unfathomable a way *a visible palpable reality in which holds extreme hope for all of us.*

The Jesus who was unquestionably dead on Friday evening was alive on Sunday morning. However inexplicably transformed, he could be touched and smelled.

You could eat a meal with him and hear his voice...

I have examined, from many angles, the still staggering fact

that a literal belief in that return

strengthened a small handful of Jesus' previously

mediocre and terrified colleagues and his murderous enemy Saul (Paul)

to transform the life and the future of the huge Roman empire

in under three centuries.

And with no shade of doubt, I can join Paul in his strongest conviction.

God has "cared" on a singular occasion of extraordinary promise for our earthly lives and thereafter."

(Reynolds Price. *Letter to a Man on Fire*, p. 72-73)

God has cared!

God in Christ is the dying child.

God in Christ is the helpless son of a grieving mother.

God in Christ is where our race and God's grace

will one day pry victory from the jaws of disease and death.

Until then, we will continue to pray with our feet, to protest with our presence,

to feed with our hands, to build with our tools, to mend with our care,

to love with our words and deeds, until God's kingdom in fullness comes. Amen.