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St. Augustine's
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost/12 June 2016
2 Sam 11:26-12:10/Galatians 2:15-21/Luke 7:36-8:3

A'MAN

Today's story from Luke many of us have heard before, in one form or another. Someone in physical or emotional or spiritual pain comes to Jesus. Others at the scene protest that this is a bad person, send her away! Or they sneer at Jesus' apparent healing powers. In any case, women and men are healed.

But -- how did the woman anointing Jesus and the "number of other women set free" get to the place of healing? And I don't mean: Did they hitch a ride on a donkey or walk fifty kilometers.

The answer, perhaps, is in what we hear Jesus say today to the woman at his feet. Indulge me for this moment as I now switch to the King James version of the Bible, a translation recognized as not the best from the Greek but still the most poetic. Because what Jesus says here is more poetry than prose, a feeling condensed and made intense by one word.

Thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace.

Faith. Not to be confused with belief. Belief is saying "yes" to what cannot be understood. Belief is "he's moved me and I don't know how it's done."

This is not what Jesus meant, at least not completely. He expected the Divine and the Human to meet, as they did in his person, each doing their work. The word for

“faith” in Aramaic is *a'man* (*ah-mahn*). This was the language of the daily, the vernacular of the Jewish people. Sound familiar? Yes. Amen.

A'man means to be strong, to make firm, to persevere. People of *a'man*, people of faith, do not give up. They do not spend their time seeking miracles from the next prophet passing by, but by waking up and realizing:

“I have to get on that donkey and ride to find that person who understands that *I can change*. That, no matter how much time I have left in this body, I can be someone who can love and serve in this world. I can be the person who deep deep down -- some of us, very deep --I truly am.”

The unnamed women we meet today -- as well as Mary of Magdala -- were so weighed down by grief and sorrow, they were ready to transform their lives. Sin? Frankly, I have my doubts. A label imposed upon them by those in charge of their world, that is all we can know.

But, whatever its source, grief and sorrow is the place where change is born, not in a “flatline” life, a life where we just hum along, where everything is “sort of” okay.

More modern language applied to this originated with Carl Jung, who wrote that change rests upon three principles: Insight, endurance, action. He admitted that the field of psychology can help only with the first of these, insight. We see where we are, who we are, and know this is not life. Facing pain, shame, regret is an enormous task.

But insight will not sustain anyone, Jung said. That takes *a'man*. Endurance. Strength. And that requires a person to become a disciple, which simply means “one who learns.” Being with others, learning with others who know how to love.

And all of those who came to Jesus knew that this was a good man. He could take them beyond death into life.

Such events, such scenes, play over and over in our lives. These are the stories that haunt us, and also can sustain us. Sometimes we notice. Often, it is in the presence of darkness, silence, and death, the three great teachers of insight and endurance and, if time remains, action.

One scene that remains vivid for me happened almost 30 years ago.

A hospital room. My father has been in a coma for a month. My family is taking shifts so he is not alone. Tonight is my turn. For most of this time, my father has had John as his roommate. I never speak to him, and he equally ignores me. He is about my age, in his early 30s, and has a congenital heart disease. I know this from the doctors' visits. They're not discrete. John understands there is no more hope to be found for him in surgery or drugs. He will soon die.

But I'm not sad about this. In truth, I feel little compassion for him. He is a drug dealer, and even in these last days he is still dealing over the phone and with some of rather unsavory visitors to his room. My father, I angrily think, deserves to spend his last days in better company, although I don't know if he is aware of any of this.

No, Dad isn't. If he were, he would be talking to John as if...well, as if John were Jesus. My father is blessed with congenital kindness. Where others see evil, he sees only goodness wearing a mask.

I am standing at the window, looking up at a clear and cold November night sky. John, still able to walk, is standing next to me. Surprising me, he speaks.

"The only one who will miss me is my dog."

I am thinking: Say something kind to him. About his parents who visit every day and then escape into the hallway, not wanting their son -- yes, their beloved son -- to see them cry.

But I can't. Instead I'm thinking: For all of the stuff you've done, the harm you caused...no, I'm not going to let you off the hook.

I return to sit on the edge of my father's bed. John stretches out on his.

"He's a good man," he suddenly says. "Your father."

I'm confused, thrown off. How does he know this?

"Did you speak to him?" I ask.

"No, he's never awake. But I can tell because you love him so much."

"Yes," is all I say. "Thank you."

When I leave in the early morning, John is asleep. When I return late that afternoon, the bed is empty.

Faith has made thee whole.

John, in his final hours, found the strength to recognize love in another. Did he accept it in himself, made visible in the tears of his parents? I will never know. Will he be

with Jesus in paradise? I will never know. But in his death, he touched life, and aroused compassion in me. The tragedy here is that he never had the time to make right at least some of the wrongs. Of the harm he did to himself, and to others.

But -- do any of us? Can any of us claim that we see the consequences of our actions in ourselves, and if we harm ourselves we can't help but harm our lovers, our friends, and rippling outward into the world.

The man with whom Jesus dined, and many others, reminded him: This is a bad person! She can't change! Why are you wasting your time?

Were they especially evil? No, I don't think so. They deserve compassion, too, because they also are in us. They were scared. Because if someone they perceived as much worse than themselves could become part of Jesus' gang -- dealers in a drug that could really turn the world upside down -- then they wouldn't have many excuses themselves.

Truth is, disciples of Christ, those who learn from Christ, cannot be "flatliners." We're not called to hum along through life, but to become people of *a'man*. Whose strength is not in being "well, maybe someday my life may change, if I have some spare time, if things get really bad..." but who have been chosen for change. People not afraid to get on that donkey and join the One who takes us to the next place, who takes us from death to life, who sets us free. With whom we will, always, be made whole, and go in peace. *Shalom*.

And the people say...

