

Sixteenth Weekend After Pentecost (B/RCL): The Patron Saint of Mother Bears
Mark 7:24-37
September 8-9, 2018
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Kinda like when you live at the Shore you get lots of company (especially in the summer ☺), when I lived in the D.C. area I saw a lot of out-of-town family and friends. I came up with a standard tour itinerary to introduce them to the riches of our nation's capital. It included the National Gallery of Art, the Air & Space Museum, the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History where I liked to visit the orchids, and the Smithsonian Museum of American History, where I'd swing by the Charles Lindbergh display to see the photo of him and his plane that my grandfather took, and then I'd go to the movie section to admire the ruby red slippers from *The Wizard of Oz*.

I was curious why a picture of those shoes showed up on the front page of the paper this past week. The caption said, "Click Together Three Times: Ruby slippers worn by Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz* have been found 13 years after they were stolen." I wondered, "What kind of *Oceans 8* scenario is necessary to steal something from The Smithsonian?" Then I read the article and learned there had been **another** pair of ruby red slippers displayed at the Judy Garland Museum in Grand Rapids, MN, where she grew up. **That's** the pair that had been swiped. The FBI's art crime unit, "in conjunction with other federal agencies," found and returned them earlier this year. The collector who owned the shoes had loaned them to the museum, but since the insurance company paid him \$800,000 after the theft, they now belong to that company.

Rhys Thomas has written a book *The Ruby Slippers of Oz*. In an interview he had this to say:

"These shoes are the holy grail of all Hollywood memorabilia... There isn't anything else that does more to evoke the power of belief."¹

Call me crazy, but in my mind he's overstating the case. 'Makes me think of watching *Peter Pan* on TV when I was little; every single year I hoped, wished, prayed that Tinkerbell's light would **not** be

extinguished but would grow and glow brighter and brighter as she got better and better from the poison that nasty, evil Captain Hook had slyly left for her to drink.

Moving from fantasy to real life, my vote for the person in Scripture who “does more [than anyone else] to evoke the power of belief” is the mother in today’s Gospel. The story is all the more powerful because she’s a Gentile not a Jew. She’s a pagan and her people **haven’t** been waiting around a thousand years for God to deliver on the promise of a Messiah. But she **has** been waiting and working to find a cure, relief, return to health and joy, for her child, whom our Gospel says has “an unclean spirit” and whom Eugene Peterson in *The Message* describes as *a disturbed daughter* (Mark 7:25). This woman should be the patron saint of all Mama Bears.

You’ve heard her story before, both the version we heard today from St. Mark, and the other one from St. Matthew. St. Mark describes her as actually **entering** a home where Jesus is trying to stay under the radar, seeking some peace and privacy. It was **unheard of** for a Gentile woman to enter what must have been a Jewish household. She comes and **bows down** at His feet and “**begged** him to cast the demon out of her daughter.” (Mark 7:26) She’s a strong advocate, willing to absorb rather than react to insult, as long as her plea is heard and her request granted.

St. Matthew starts the story differently. He’s got the woman outside, shouting after Jesus like blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:47; cf. Luke 18:38):

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”
But he did not answer her at all. (Matt. 15:22-23)

The disciples want Jesus to tell her to get lost. “She’s bothering us.”

He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”
*But she came and knelt before him, saying, “**Lord, help me.**”* (Matt. 15:24-25)

As in St. Mark’s Gospel, she’s not leaving without getting what she came for. It’s interesting that she says, “*Have mercy on **me**, Lord... Lord, help **me.**”* She loves her daughter so much, the

daughter's need is her own. She feels the daughter's torment in her own bones. And there was no other help to be had but the healing power of this Jesus of Nazareth, word of whom had spread even to non-Jews.

At the healing service last Wednesday we heard a tiny Gospel passage that I'd never paid much attention to but noticed because it comes just before last week's story about handwashing.

When [Jesus and the disciples] got out of the boat [at Gennesaret], people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed. (Mark 6:54-56)

There were no hospitals. There were no urgent care centers. There were no pharmacies, no ability to go online to Mayo Clinic.com and come up with diagnosis or treatment. People didn't have a lot of healing options. So they went to Jesus, having heard that He made folks whole again. People like the friends of the deaf man in today's Gospel, like the friends of the paralytic who hauled him up to a roof, dug a hole in it and dropped him at Jesus' feet. Friends and relatives physically carried their loved ones on stretchers for distances that would boggle our minds. So great was their love, so great their hope that Jesus could mend broken bodies, minds and spirits.

In some cases the patient couldn't be transported, like the tormented daughter of the Mother Bear in today's Gospel, like the daughter of Jairus, like the centurion's servant. In those cases the mother, the father, the master carried the need instead of the person to Jesus. **Their** faith is what's evident and is what Jesus praises. In St. Matthew's Gospel He exclaims to the woman who wouldn't take no for an answer and who was more than happy to settle for crumbs:

*"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."
And her daughter was healed instantly. (Matt. 15:28)*

Can we do any less for our loved ones? Let's acknowledge the power of intercession. In Holy Baptism we received a priestly identity, a divine call to bring the world and the people in it

before God's throne, to pray for healing, for all the gifts God has to give. We have other avenues of healing, for sure. We **do** have physicians, hospitals, urgent care centers, pharmacies, physical therapy practices galore. They are blessings and they **channel** Jesus' power to heal. But they are not meant to be "the be all and end all." They aren't intended to replace prayer, our beseeching of God for the healing that comes directly from on high. If people believed this, we'd certainly have more than 13 people at a healing service, petitioning for themselves and for loved ones. 2,000 years ago people carried loved ones on litters for long distances, as still happens in the third world today. Are we willing to carry loved ones on our hearts, to place and keep them under the Lord's gaze, to do more than to ask someone else to pray for them? Can **we** be a Mother Bear of prayer? Are we willing to do the work of intercession?

When "Mr. Rogers" died I read a column about the documentary, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" It mentioned how he once visited a 14-year-old disabled by cerebral palsy and asked the teen to pray for him. Afterwards someone commented on how nice and wise it was of him to make the boy feel important. Fred Rogers responded:

"Oh, heavens no...! I didn't ask him for his prayers for *him*; I asked for me. I asked him because I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God. I asked him because I wanted his *intercession*."²

Mr. Rogers, an ordained Presbyterian minister, believed in and sought out the power of prayer.

Back to the ruby slippers. What or who "evokes the power of belief" in us? If it's missing, are we searching for it? Word and Sacrament are the best places to begin. Amen

¹Jennifer Medina, "Two Slippers Are Sparkling Back Where They Belong" (*New York Times*, September 8, 2018), A12.

²David Brooks, "The Loveliness of the Little Good" (*New York Times*, July 6, 2018), A21.

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