

# If There Be First a Willing Mind

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – June 30, 2024

I find I both love and do not love stories such as we just heard – stories in which Jesus heals people in ways that none of us is able to heal people. He lays his hands upon a dead young girl, and the girl returns to the living. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could do that? He walks among people and a woman who is very ill touches his robe; *mirabile dictu*, she is ill not anymore. Imagine being able to practice medicine like that. Prior to this in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus drove a demon out of a man so wracked with it that he had to be put in irons to stop him from harming himself and others. What a gift that would be – though perhaps not the particular way he did it. In that story, Jesus forces the demon to leave the man alone and instead fall upon a herd of pigs, who promptly drown themselves rather than live possessed by demons.

Pigs are no fools; as clever and bright as their flesh is tasty, to them and to us, they know when the jig is up, and life no longer worth the bother of living it. Why Jesus does not cure them, or make provision for the swineherds now bereft of their livelihood, is a nice question.<sup>1</sup> Ought one heal one very sick person yet in doing so leave hundreds to go hungry? It's not always easy to know how to allocate precious resources, and people of goodwill and integrity debate these questions all the time. Use one's power badly, though – healing or otherwise – and people will notice and react. Once folks find out what Jesus did, and how, they asked him, politely but

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<sup>1</sup> See. Mk.5:1-17. The demon, whose name is 'Legion', may be a metaphor for the Roman military. Roman rule required Roman arms, and Roman arms required Roman food. Pork is not kosher; only Gentiles could eat the meat of these pigs or make use of their leather. Gadara, where the man in question was from, was a Gentile town in a Gentile region, and a good source of food for a Gentile army, such as that of Rome. Casting out a demon named after Roman troops and in doing so eliminating a source of Roman food as well may be Mark's way of telling the story of what Jesus could do, as a Messiah, to all the Romans in this region, and indeed all the Gentiles in this region, if he wanted to.

firmly, to leave their country. Imagine working miracles and having that be the response; wow. He does as they ask, though; he, like the demon, leaves and never comes back.

Where he goes instead is over the Sea of Galilee and back into Galilee, near to where a certain Jairus is leader of a synagogue and whose daughter lies close to death. Could Jesus, please, come make her well? This side of the sea, at least, people aren't afraid of him or troubled by how he does things. He heads off straightaway to help. As he goes along, the crowd presses upon him. In the midst of the crowd there is a woman with a flow of blood trying to get to him, also to get healed. She might not be able to get him to talk to her, but figures if she just touches his robe....

We speak blithely sometimes, or at least I do, of the need to be healed 'in body, mind, and spirit', as though it had always been obvious that each mode of our being can become ill and can be healed. We do this until we come across someone who is not going to get well, or whose body is fine but whose mind or spirit has fallen into shadow. Then, stories like we just heard begin to sting. People begin to ask, 'Jesus saved that man's child. Why won't he save mine?' or 'All that woman had to do was touch his robe. Where can I go to touch his robe and be made well?' One could even imagine someone saying, 'I see those pigs (or cows, or sheep) over there in that field are doing pretty well. Why can't my brother's schizophrenia or bipolar disorder go bother them for a change? Why hath our bacon more joy than we?'

We no longer consider physical ailments as signs of sins to be condemned, though we rightly chide ourselves to avoid those diets and behaviors that damage the body. We have come a long way in recognizing mental illnesses and addictions as illnesses, not character flaws, though we rightly chide those who refuse the medicines and therapies that can help one live with them. We understand that despair and hopelessness, apathy and *acedia*, weaken the spirit and sap strength from body and mind. Healing from them is not easy. But it is possible.

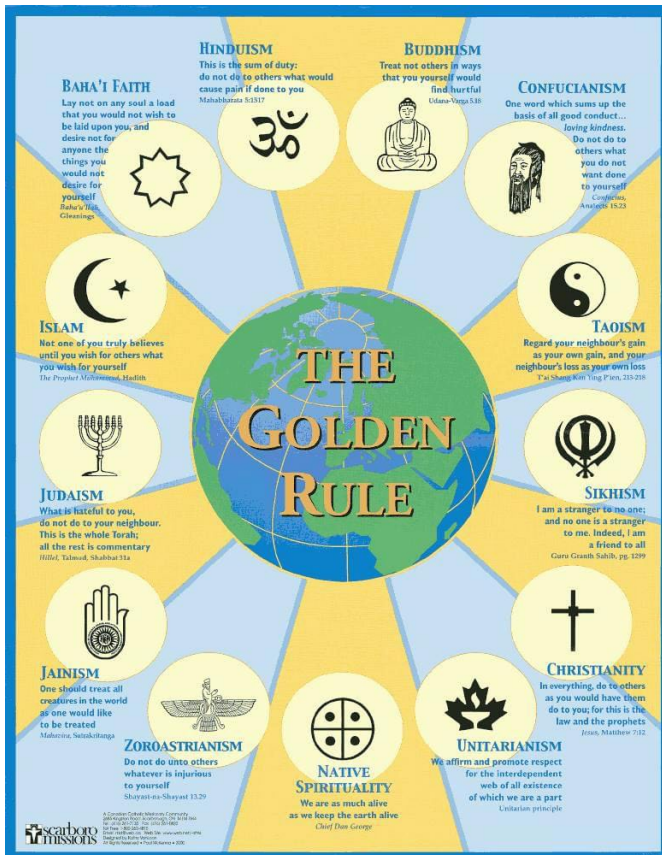
What it takes is not trying to figure out where the miracle-worker is so that we can go ask him or touch him. We no longer know Christ in that way. We no longer relate to him as to a person we can see and hear, touch and smell. We no longer relate to him as one who shows his power by working miracles / doing signs of power – performing magic tricks, as it were. We need to understand: he is not going to take the wheel, he is not going to calm the winds or the waves, he is not going to solve our problems for us, he is not going to bring our loved ones back from the dead, and he is not going to stop people from dying. Or, for that matter, stop them from living.

What he is going to do is the thing he did best, and most wanted us to do. He is going to keep inspiring us to treat one another kindly, lovingly, as good neighbors, good families and good friends. He is going to keep reminding us – through the stories we tell of him, the words that come down to us from him, and the lives made better because they paid attention to them – that life is meant to be lived well and graciously, with generosity and mutual regard and compassion. No other way of living is worth living.

The best spiritual leaders humanity has ever known agree. In the online copy of this sermon you will find a graphic that shows a representative sample of how various religions express the point. It's labeled "The Golden Rule." The different ways of expressing this rule are not identical, but they're pretty close. Following any would make for a good life. Following all would make for good lives all around, and address the spiritual and physical poverty present the world over that is caused by those who think that the real Golden Rule is, 'They Who Have the Gold Make the Rules'. Only misery can follow from such immorality. The actual Golden Rule, writ larger, reminds us that religions, at their best, inspire us to live graciously, to love sacrificially, to break chains until we run out of chains, and to care for one another no matter what. They remind us that that's what God wants, whatever term or word we use

for God. Religions at their worst, by contrast, do not do this. Instead, they either turn us into murderous tyrants or keep us in thrall to them. In both cases, they make people do the opposite of the Golden Rule, and in so doing make them miserable, mystified, anxious, and stupid. They make of ‘God’ an idol that is impossible to please and immoral to follow. We’d be better off dying of hemorrhages or becoming ‘pulp for the Gadarene / Squealers’ than to follow religions such as they.<sup>2</sup>

The churches of whom we heard in our second reading today, from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians,



followed this kind of a good religion. You can tell that because Paul speaks of them as giving, even sacrificially, to those who were in need. These were churches in Macedonia – churches such as those in Philippi and Thessalonika, to the north and northeast of Corinth. When Paul and the other disciples who’d come from Jerusalem and Antioch asked those churches to give to help those in Jerusalem who weren’t doing so well, they gave of what they had, whether a lot or a little. They gave

what money and goods they could to help people far away, with the expectation that those to whom they gave it would pay it forward, helping others in turn – including,

<sup>2</sup> The quote is from Geoffrey Hill, ‘Locust Songs’ 2: ‘Good Husbandry’, a poem that presents how the pridefulness at the heart of Puritan thrift and self-regard turned New World abundance and potential into a society based on selfishness, exploitation, war, and greed. The pulp in question is from windfall apples, such as those planted by that famous apple tree and hard-cider *aficionado* Johnny Appleseed. Pigs love to eat them.

should the winds of fortune shift, those who gave the original gifts. They knew that those with needs greater than their own needed their help, and they gave it.

Paul was impressed, and wished to impress upon the people of the church in Corinth how good it would be if they did likewise. He wanted them to understand how good it would be for them as givers, as well as for those in need of what they chose to give.

‘If there be but a willing mind’ to act with such grace and charity, Paul writes –KJV and Geneva set that phrase in place of the NRSV’s ‘eagerness’ – such an offering is accepted according to what we have, not according to what we don’t. That is: if we want to help others, God will help us find ways to do so that we can handle, and so doing will make a positive difference in our life as well as the lives of others. Not that others should be eased and you grieved, Paul reminds them. He did not ask them to give until it hurt. He asked them to give until it mattered.

A gift to a church, then as now, is well to think of as a kind of investment. It’s not an investment where we measure the return in terms of more money, but in more ministry. Then, as now, churches that follow a good religion and put the Golden Rule at the heart of their mission – as we do, and I pray that we always do – depend on their members for the resources to fulfill that mission and fully fund the ministries, and the ministers, that enact it. They depend on them, and know they can depend on them, in every sense of the term. When we invest in our church, we invest in ourselves and in the ideals to which we aspire: to be Christ’s body in the world, and to carry forth Christ’s ministry in the world. As I often say, Christ has no heart, no head, and no hands in the world now but ours. That’s the way He wanted it. That’s the way God wants it. He was with us, in the person of Jesus, for a time – time enough to inspire us to be like Him and to do what He commanded: to love one another as God loved us, and turn the world inside-out and over again to put such self-giving love at the center of how we all live in it.

Lord knows it isn't always easy. Lord knows but that we sometimes get on one another's nerves to the point of distraction. Lord knows we often disappoint and even hurt one another even when we don't mean. Church wasn't easy in Paul's day, either. Think of how often he chides the people in the churches in Corinth, Philippi, Ephesus, Thessalonika, in the province of Galatia, and in Rome itself, the eternal city to which all roads lead and which was ruled in his day by those who worked night and day to build a world in which no-one followed the Golden Rule. That ended badly, as selfishness and shortsightedness always do. Yet if there be first a willing mind to live differently, to do unto others as that mind would have done unto itself, such an end need not be our end. We may not be able to heal people magically, as Jesus did. But we can heal the world and ourselves intentionally, as the churches in Macedonia did, by doing all we can and using all we have to make our lives good, and others' lives better.

Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, as the Good Book elsewhere says. That way, and only that way, do we and the world get any better at all. *Amen.*