

Take Heart (My Teacher let me see again)

Psalm 34:1-8; Mark 10:46-52

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC Camden, October 28, 2018, Remembrance Sunday

It was late afternoon on a Monday in mid-January of 1998 when my oldest sister called to tell me that our middle sister Gudrun was in the hospital in the intensive care unit. Her heart had failed her while she was out shopping with my mom during a visit home. Gudrun, which means “good fortune,” had collapsed in the rain in the parking lot of a discount store. A nurse happened to shop at the same time, called a doctor and took first measures to save her life. Gudrun was resuscitated and was being kept alive with the help of an external pace maker when my older sister called. Gudrun would die over the course of the night. She was 36. I don’t call that good fortune.

I imagine most of you here today have experienced the death of someone you love under tragic and painful circumstances. All of us here have been exposed to such suffering vicariously through the media or through relating to others who have had to struggle with the death of a loved one. The terrible shootings at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh are our most recent example. In light of this, words like we heard from the Psalm today can take on a cynical tone for us. “This poor soul cried out, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who are in awe of God, and delivers them (Psalm 34:6-7).” Really? Does it always work this way?

We do hear of a man in our Gospel story who cried out in his trouble and was healed. Blind Bartimaeus has to sit outside the gates of the city Jericho, reduced to begging to survive. In those days, illness was seen as a punishment or curse. Such thinking makes for easy answers, for some. Bartimaeus seems isolated in his suffering and some even “sternly ordered him to be quiet” (Mark 10:48) when he tries to get Jesus’ attention. Thankfully, Bartimaeus only calls out even louder to Jesus, who hears him. Only when Jesus responds, does someone say to Bartimaeus: “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” Imagine the tender encounter between Bartimaeus and Jesus when Jesus asks directly: “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus answers: “My teacher, let me see again.” (Do you, do I know what we would actually answer Jesus if he asked us what we were actually longing for?) Bartimaeus is healed and we hear Jesus saying, “Your faith has made you well.” At least Jesus did not imply that Bartimaeus was to blame for his own blindness but what does Jesus mean when he says that our faith can make us well?

While I personally do not doubt Jesus’ power to heal, I don’t believe there is always some easy equation between a person’s faith and their suffering as though suffering was always some result of a person’s lack of faith or supposed wrongdoing. There is no easy equation between our faith and deliverance, at least not if we assume that one’s measure of faith equates the measure, or lack thereof, of deliverance. Suffering is

often caused by the actions of others acting as though they are blind (i.e., by seeing an enemy in their Jewish or African-American neighbor). Sometimes suffering is the result of someone simply not paying attention. And then there is the not quite explainable change in biological processes that leave some struggling – like my sister who grew up with a congenital heart defect. My teacher Jim Finley likes to say that God does not promise to protect us from suffering. Rather, God sustains us in the midst of suffering. God is with us and loves us amidst the frailty of our existence with a love that will not let us go even when we are tempted to let go of God.

As I just mentioned, stories about blindness and recovery of sight in the Gospel usually have a metaphorical component about having to learn to see the world, our lives, and God in a new way. I would like to tell you more about how my sister's death eventually gifted me with a new sight, if you will, and a way in which faith made me well. I do not intend to make my family or my experience a regular focus of sermons though may perhaps do so a little more at the beginning as we are getting to know each other. Let me tell you more about her on the Remembrance Sunday when we remember loved ones who have passed on.

Gudrun was a great sister, especially a great older sister. She was in many ways a still point for me. She taught me how to ride my bike, built forts for my tin soldiers, let me crawl into bed with her when I got scared during thunder storms. She was the stable older sister who was always there for me when I got into a scrape even when I got older. She picked me up more than once when I had gotten stuck somewhere hitchhiking. She was highly capable of that rare gift of unconditional love. My sister was bright and inquisitive and did not like easy answers to any question. She read avidly, loved mysteries, studied Shakespeare in the original because she so loved theater. She was an opera and classical music buff. Gudrun learned to play the cello in her thirties. I still have images in my mind of her riding a bicycle to her cello lesson with the cello strapped on her back.

Gudrun needed a good deal of solitude and didn't like crowds. She was the kind of person who forged friendships slowly but would tend to them with utmost care. She was very gentle and compassionate, perhaps in part because she knew about suffering. Her heart ailment was diagnosed when she was 11 and the tom-boy had to slow down and find a new pace. She was in and out of treatment as a teenager, often isolated because she could not participate in activities. For this and other reasons she sometimes struggled with her self-esteem.

But just before her death, Gudrun had moved to a bigger city where she was hoping to indulge in all the cultural opportunities, had found a nice room in a housing co-op, was meeting people and feeling much better about her ability to take her life into her hands. I still have her last letter in which she wrote that she sometimes had to pinch herself to remind herself that all this was real. Then her life came to a screeching halt. I wonder whether making all those changes cost her last bit of energy. I also know that she was concerned about the side effects of a new medication which listed that her heart could stop.

After getting the call from Dorothea, my oldest sister, I spent the night watching and praying. When I called home in the morning before my flight, I was told, Gudrun had died a few hours ago. I spent the flight home in a stupor. I kept hitting the wall of: "This can't be possible." Reality was beginning to seep in when Gudrun wasn't at the airport as usual to pick me up. My brother in law had come with her car. The first thing my sister and I did once I got home was to go to the hospital morgue so that I could see her one last time. My mother was too shattered to come. We were greeted at the hospital entrance by the warden of the morgue who had made special arrangements to keep my sister longer so that I could see her (we do not embalm in Germany). He was wearing a white robe. He was very kind and soft-spoken and led us gently as we slowly descended into the belly of the hospital.

The atmosphere around us became increasingly sterile: gray tiles were lining the walls and floors of meandering hallways. When we walked into the morgue area a few colorful but jaggedly abstract pictures emerged on the walls. The warden had hung them there "to at least add some color," he said. It was also because of his concern for us that he had set up a little make-shift chapel. There was my sister laid in state in white linen on a stretcher. A dozen red roses were on her chest. Her best friend had sent them from Berlin when there was still hope that she would live. There were other flowers and candles arranged around her. There we were, the three of us and it didn't take long before we were all just sobbing and holding on to each other. After a while, we sang a song of farewell that she liked.

I still remember how fragile and small she looked. Her face still bore signs of resuscitation attempts from tubes and masks. Another thing that I will never forget is that her eyes were slightly open and that it startled me that the bright blue sparkle had disappeared. Suddenly, I was beside myself with terror and the feeling got stronger the longer I stayed. Then, suddenly things began to shift. I was standing at the foot of her stretcher, reeling to leave, when I began to see a larger picture. I had taken in the flowers and candles around her but I had not really paid attention to what was standing right behind her head.

There was a four-foot wooden cross with a carved figure of the crucified Christ. I looked at this Christ with his face in agony, a crown of thorns on his head, a gaping wound in his side, nails through his wrists and feet and looked at my sister. Suddenly, I saw the two as one. The suffering Christ, the son of God who knew pain, loss and death and my sister who had known suffering and pain and loss were as one. There was no separation. That moment I gained a new sight. I lost all my fear of what had happened to her or what would.

I knew that Christ had also come to share her pain and was now inviting her into his outstretched arms, the arms of the one who had said: "Come unto me all of you who are heavy laden ... (Matthew 11:28-29)." God in Christ had walked with her in her illness and isolation and also as she came into a new place of opening and happiness. God walked with her when her body couldn't walk any further. God has walked with me since that moment through times of grief and has brought me back over and over again to this deeper connection with which I was gifted that day.

This connection was also confirmed by a dream I had two weeks after her death. There was no story, no context. She was just right next to me all of a sudden with her face just inches away. And she looked me in the eyes very calmly and broke into a big smile with her eyes shining in their bright blue glory. She had recovered her sight wherever she was. Now, whenever I am confronted with death, this dream makes me take heart. It reminds me each time to ask God to help me see again, to recover that sight beyond death and suffering. If my faith is making me well, it is simply that it allows me to trust in God's presence and power to sustain life even beyond death and the suffering and hurts we inflict upon one another. It does not take away all the questions about suffering in our world but allows me to rest in mystery. As we read on our bulletin cover today, life begins and ends in mystery but what a beautiful country lies between. Amen.