

Just Help—Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
August 21, 2016

I received a phone call this week from a friend who pastors a church in the Harambee neighborhood about two and a half miles west of where we're sitting right now. My friend called to say that one of his church members had been shot and killed a week ago several blocks from where the struggle happened in Sherman Park. The family are not in a position to afford a cremation, and this pastor wondered if St. Mark's and a few other churches could help shoulder the costs. The young man was 25.

I admit to a certain numbness when I am confronted with headlines that begin to look like the headlines from last summer or the summer before. Haven't we heard these stories over and over? I've become quite a whiz at compartmentalizing suffering that happens two and a half miles from my church. I'm from Chicago, so I have lots of practice with this kind of thing.

But there was something about this phone call this week and has stuck with me. It wasn't an abstraction to me anymore. I wasn't pulled into a policy discussion about gun rights or urban blight or the political will of the government. Instead, I found myself confronted with a family whose son had died and who needed help.

I wish that it didn't sometimes take the cry of someone in need to bring clarity. Why does it take a tragic phone call or a haunting picture of a little Syrian boy to arrest our attention enough to give aid? How come our minds get muddy—filled with the flotsam and jetsam of unimportant things? I don't know that answer, but I know that it absolutely happens.

When I read a Gospel story like the one this morning—the woman who had been sick for 18 years—I often try to figure out who the people in story might be. Is there some important connection between the people Jesus encounters and the people we encounter in our short lives?

This morning's Gospel story resisted my usual attempts. This hurting woman that Jesus so brazenly heals on the Sabbath didn't strike me as anyone in particular. She had been suffering from some kind of ailment for 18 years. And her suffering year after year put me in mind of the headlines of war and violence that I have become accustomed to reading every year of my adult life. Her suffering seemed like it went on forever. These headlines seem like they go on forever.

What if the woman who is pleading with God for relief from her suffering is not a woman at all. What if, in her cry, is the entire world? This woman; this broken and desperate woman, could be the entire creation that screams to God in pain and who begs for relief. She say, "how long, Lord? How long will I have to suffer?"

And Jesus does not talk to her about the difficulties of healing her on the day when everyone is supposed to be resting. He does not check her license to make sure she is a member in good

standing of the nation of Israel. He does not bill her for services rendered. He just helps. Jesus looks at a woman in pain for 18 years and he simply helps.

Go and do likewise, I can hear God saying to us right now.

At this point in the sermon, I'm typically supposed to say something about how the presence of Jesus in the life of the woman conferred on her a grace that is similar to the grace conferred on us in our Baptism. Just as Jesus shows up to the woman in need, so too does Jesus show up in our lives that are broken and in need of that grace. That is the sermon that I've given many times and one that I will no doubt give many more. And, of course, all of that is true. It just doesn't seem as interesting to me this morning as the simple kindness that Jesus acts out.

Today, I'm struck by the more simple reading. Jesus just helped her. The powers of the world tried very hard to make that kind of simple assistance hard. The religious leaders of the day got so angry at Jesus for breaking the sabbath rules that Jesus finally lost his temper and called them a bunch of hypocrites.

All of that drama is striking and beautiful, and I'm so glad that the author of Luke included it for us to chew on for two thousand years.

But the seed of the story—the part that will grow into something beautiful—is the simple fact that Jesus saw a need and he helped.

So, on a different Sunday, I'll talk more about the dimensions of grace and how the church teaches about sin and atonement and all that jazz.

For today, I want us to look with the eyes of Jesus on a world that has been struggling for a long time. I want us to hear the cries of women in need; of parents who can't afford to bury their son who was taken from this life far too soon. I want us to find the opportunities in this world to go out there and help.

I know it's hard. I know it can be overwhelming to even conceive of where to start. But fear not. There are lots of us. We surely can do a little bit here and there to fight back the darkness.

There are going to be places this week for you to reach out and help. I don't know what they are. They might be really big places; you might be in a position to address some of the monstrous injustices in our world that harm the most vulnerable among us. Or they might be as small as a simple kindness delivered because you took a little more time, paid a little more attention.

St. Mark's did help to bury that young man. Maybe it seems just routine when you put a few bucks in the plate as it passes or when you write your check faithfully. But it's not just routine. It's a tiny act of resistance to a world that doesn't always encourage us to see the image of God in ourselves and in one another. It's a few pennies that can make an enormous difference to a family grieving their son just a few miles from where we go to church.

Jesus helped. We help. Amen.