

Easter 6C – May 13, 2007 – Elizabeth Prevost

Today's readings give us some tantalizing glimpses of the healing power of the resurrection. The gospel tells of a man whose 38-yr infirmity was miraculously cured, without any prior warning. How much joy must this man have felt in that moment when he realized that Jesus had given him his life back! After a lifetime of illness and incapacitation, all the while depending on others for even his basic human needs, Jesus had suddenly made him whole. And in John's revelation, we see a vision of a heavenly community in which all human strife has been replaced with peace and reconciliation. At the center of this city of God flows the water of life, flanked by the tree of life.

This time of year, Grinnell could almost be the new Jerusalem, as the life and vitality of the season infuses the community with a healthfulness that is evocative of John's vision. Of course, this is also the time of year when I, personally, am at my most exhausted. I feel strangely caught between the simultaneous rhythms of exhilaration and fatigue, between celebrating accomplishment and worrying about all that is yet to be done. At the college and other educational bodies, many students and faculty are coming to the end of their academic careers, while looking forward to new opportunities. It seems that there is no clean or easy divide between the cycles of life.

The stories from the gospel and Revelation capture the different kinds of healing and closure our human natures crave: individual and corporate wellbeing; health of the physical body, spiritual body, and the social body. Most of all, we yearn for a restorative condition which is immediate, tangible, and permanent.

Yet, we all know how elusive this kind of health can be, in the face of so many individual and collective ailments and troubles. Jesus healed this one man in the story, but the evangelist makes reference to many others at the pool who probably remained lame and blind. In my own relationships of late, cancer has been particularly ubiquitous, and I know I am not alone in that experience. Cancer: that ruthless disease that invades the body without warning and decimates without discrimination. Human science can mitigate its effects but not cure the disease. For every story of containment and remission there seem to be two more of spread and degeneration. And then there are the larger social realities of illness and fragmentation in our world: troubled families and communities, pandemics and famine, clashes of identities and material needs which turn violent. John's vision represents the leaves of the tree of life as the instrument for healing the nations. I have often wondered: where does one get one of these trees??

This week in one of my classes, I felt that I had an encounter with a few of its leaves. We had been studying Apartheid, the ruthless system of racial segregation in South Africa which ended in 1994. We concluded by discussing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and we had the opportunity to talk firsthand with one of its members. The Commission, led by Archbishop Tutu, was set up after the end of Apartheid in order to publicize the long record of injustice, to restore dignity to the victims, and to begin the seemingly impossible task of enabling former adversaries to live side by side in the new nation. The Commission was premised on the belief that there could be no reconciliation between South Africans without truthfully acknowledging what had divided them in the first place. Thus, it

conducted voluntary hearings in which both the victims and the perpetrators of Apartheid could tell their stories. For perpetrators, the hearings could produce amnesty from jail time; for victims, it offered hope of discovering what had happened to loved ones who had disappeared, perhaps even the recovery and burial of their remains. In a few cases, the hearings brought formerly antagonistic parties face to face with one another. Members of the secret police faced the family members of a suspected dissident who had been tortured to death while being retained without trial. Freedom fighters faced the husband of a woman who was killed in a guerilla attack on a church congregation. The amazing thing about these meetings is that they did not take place in a courtroom, but rather in a confessional setting. Sometimes, one party would ask the other for forgiveness; sometimes, this request was even granted.

For many participants, the Commission offered a way to move forward. Yet the TRC has also been criticized and resented by many other South Africans, who felt that the Commission did not bring closure or reconciliation, but rather opened old wounds and perpetuated mutual distrust. I was reminded of my visit to Robben Island a few years ago, where Mandela spent 27 years in prison and which is now a kind of museum with former inmates as tour guides. The man who led my particular tour told us bitterly that his former prison guards, who had tortured him and stripped him of all human dignity, are now wealthy financiers in Johannesburg as a result of the amnesty recommended by the TRC. For this man, seeing individual justice served would have been the preferable outcome. The process of collective reconciliation might also hold small comfort for someone whose family

member is gone, who still lives in fear of urban violence, and who continues to struggle with severe poverty.

The members and supporters of the Commission are the first to admit that the TRC did not in fact accomplish reconciliation. It was never intended to do so, but rather to lay some groundwork for a long and painful process of healing. Our contact from the Commission described how time and again, people would come to the hearings as broken human beings, tortured by guilt and loss, and how they would experience the act of forgiving others or forgiving oneself as a deeply curative tonic. One of the most famous illustrations of the TRC as a restorative agent was that of Amy Biehl, the American student who was killed by gang members near Cape Town. When her four killers were granted amnesty through the TRC, her parents supported the decision, and eventually traveled to South Africa to meet and talk with these men. They developed a close relationship, and today two of the four men work for the charitable foundation established by the Biehls, which is dedicated to the eradication of violence in South Africa.

Most of us cannot honestly fathom such a capacity for forgiveness. But Christians are called and challenged to do just that: to be the instruments of grace and healing rather than retribution. For the Biehls, the only path to healing was through forgiveness. This kind of reconciliation must necessarily be a long-term investment, which runs counter to our human desire for instant gratification. We desperately want our brokenness to be made whole. We are impatient for that day to arrive when, like John, we will be assured that “There will be no more night.” The fact that life does not yield such quick or definitive resolution is unsettling. Yet there is also

deep comfort in recognizing that healing is not a moment but a process, which is always in the making.

So in this season of Easter, let us embrace the hope and healing of the resurrection, and pray “that the whole world may see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and that things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made.” Amen.

1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

There was particular dissatisfaction with the Amnesty process, which allowed perpetrators who committed political acts of violence to avoid jail time.

The TRC claims that it did not replace justice or the legal system, but rather But for Christians, the way of the TRC is really the only way, because it forces us to come to terms with the very difficult concept that healing is not the same as justice.

Thus, the principles of the TRC are being enacted in South Africa and the world, in small and big ways.

The physical body is frail yet resilient. Reconciliation with God and with one another.

The longer-term process of healing Many individuals feel that their cases have not been healed, and it is difficult to wait for a longer-term process of healing.

Baptism – water of life is first the water of death; death into life by passage through water; you have to go through hell to reach the other side, and it's not a particularly straight path. We grasp at health and life and life in the midst of darkness, and trust that God will show us the way to the other side.