

Homily Delivered at the 245<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of New York

Saturday, November 13, 2021

Theme: Your Faith Has Made You Whole

Nell Braxton Gibson

Luke: 17:15-16

*“Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’s feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.”*

In the early 1980s a disease called HIV/AIDS hit this country and the world. It was an awful disease, and, in the United States, it began in the gay white community. Some of you may have seen the movie Philadelphia starring Denzel Washington and Tom Hanks. It debuted at the end of 1993 and if you saw it maybe you remember the fear exhibited by the lawyers who worked with the main character, Andrew Beckett, played by Tom Hanks. Andrew Beckett was sure he’d lose his job at the law firm where he worked if his colleagues discovered that he was homosexual and HIV positive, so he kept both things a secret. Nevertheless, despite Andrew’s choosing to keep quiet, the other lawyers eventually discovered his secret, and he was fired. Philadelphia is a powerful film which sheds light on what it was really like during the early days of the AIDS pandemic when fear and ignorance rather than information tended to dictate the way people responded to those with the disease.

I had just begun my work as a member of the bishop’s staff in the early 1980s at the start of the world-wide pandemic and I remember that people all over the city had some very unhealthy responses to HIV/AIDS. Many people thought they could get AIDS simply by coming into casual contact with PWAs – people with AIDS. They thought that by touching a person with AIDS they could contract the disease.

Over time we all learned more about HIV/AIDS and realized it took very intimate contact with an HIV positive person to transmit the virus, or it took the sharing of a dirty needle after someone with the disease had used it, or we learned that a blood transfusion with blood from an infected person could transmit AIDS or that a pregnant HIV positive woman could pass the virus to her unborn child. But in the early days of the pandemic people knew little of these things and fear, ostracism, loss of a job, loss of health insurance and loss of family and friends were some of the responses toward anyone suspected of carrying the virus or having the disease and toward members of the gay community in general.



It was during this time that Governor Mario Cuomo appointed Bishop Moore Chairman of the State Commission on AIDS and the bishop decided to take two people from the diocese with him to those early meetings. I was one of the two he chose so I could help him keep track of the information being shared as we gained knowledge from members of the Gay Men's Health Crisis. Mills O'mally, a priest in the diocese, was the other person chosen. We learned a tremendous amount about HIV/AIDS during those monthly meetings and we shared what we were learning with others.

It was also during those early years that the bishop delivered a convention address on AIDS Comparing people's fear of it to people's fear of leprosy. During his address I thought back to my days in East Africa in the early 1960s when I was a member of a group of 15 or so other college students from across the United States who were part of The Episcopal Church's Venture in Mission project. We were charged with working alongside local people to build the Anglican seminary at Kongwa College in Dodoma, Tanganyika (the country now named Tanzania). During one of our days off we were taken to a leper colony where doctors explained how that contagious disease was transmitted and why lepers were separated from the rest of society. The patients in that hospital did not speak English for the most part but many of us could see that they understood they were being referred to in what appeared to be unsympathetic terms. They knew, in the same way Andrew Beckett discovered two decades later that they were the subject of comments about a disreputable condition.

Back inside the diocesan convention the bishop was coming to the end of his address. As he closed Mills O'mally rose and made his way toward one of the convention floor mics. My heart began to pound because there were not many of us with whom Mills, a gentle, introvert had shared HIS secret. Mills, like Andrew Beckett was a gay man with AIDS and as he approached the microphone, I hoped he was going to offer a resolution on AIDS based on the bishop's address. But that is not what happened. After identifying himself and thanking the bishop for his remarks, Mills announced that he was living with AIDS. The entire convention went completely silent, stunned by the revelation.

Several seconds passed before a woman delegate, a woman small in stature, by the name of Mary Wilberalski, rose from her seat, crossed the convention floor and threw her arms around Mills. He began to weep; then at least eight or ten other delegates rose from their seats, walked to the mic and embraced both Mills and Mary. And in a truly transcendent moment, the whole body of the convention rose and began a sustained applause. (Some of you here today may remember the sacredness of that moment).

That day at that convention I believe we experienced a moment of grace, a moment in which fear and ignorance were replaced by truth and trust and courage. A moment in which a marginalized person, a gay man with AIDS became like the racially marginalized Samaritan leper and was made whole.



Both Mills and the tenth leper experienced wholeness through faith. This is a theme we have seen in other stories on healing and wholeness. We see it in Mark 5 with the woman suffering from hemorrhaging who despite having spent all the money she had on doctors, grew worse. But she believed that by just touching Jesus's cloak she would be healed and when she did she too experienced wholeness.

And it is here that I want to speak about the difference I see between healing and wholeness; because we often use them interchangeably. But I do believe there is a difference between one being healed and one being made whole. Some people may disagree, but by healing I understand a person to be restored to a kind of physical health, as in the case of Jesus restoring sight to the blind. But wholeness as in the theme of this convention – your faith has made you whole – that I see a bit differently. I have a younger sister and several friends, who were stricken with polio as children and who were never cured of the disease, never healed, but they have all experienced a state of wholeness. And while the ten lepers were all healed, I believe the Samaritan also became whole.

A clergy friend once told me that Jesus is always present with the marginalized – with the poor, the sick, the racially oppressed the sexually ostracized, with untouchable lepers, contagious PWAs, the mentally challenged, the emotionally distressed, abused women and children, mistreated immigrants, and maybe even in a portion of the body of a diocesan convention. But when we embrace our faith, when we give ourselves up in ways we may not even understand, the way Mills did, the way Queen Esther did in revealing who she really was, that is when we become whole. Mills was never healed of AIDS, but I do believe he experienced wholeness.

There is something in each one of us that needs fixing that needs to be faced with faith in order for us to experience wholeness. The power in Mills embracing his faith, in rising the way he did and sharing his illness in the manner that he did – in a manner in which he could have been totally rejected – allowed him to make way for his wholeness and for the wholeness each of us was witness to when we rose to our feet. When faith is shared in such a vulnerable way with such honesty, it allows God's amazing grace to shine through in the place where our leprosy, our hemorrhaging, our AIDS, our illness resides. When people speak with such faith, even in the midst of their fear, they allow God's grace to shine through just as it did at that convention.

So maybe the gratitude the tenth leper felt in part came, because he embraced his having been made whole; embraced becoming truly who he was meant to be. Maybe what he experienced was as much about becoming whole as it was about being physically healed. And maybe that kind of grace, that kind of witness to wholeness is why a full convention rose to its feet with sustained applause, and like the leper in today's Gospel said, Thank you, Jesus.

