

JULY 1, 2018

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reading 1 [WIS 1:13-15; 2:23-24](#); Responsorial Psalm; Reading 2 [2 COR 8:7, 9, 13-15](#)

Gospel [MK 5:21-43](#)

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a large crowd gathered around him, and he stayed close to the sea. One of the synagogue officials, named Jairus, came forward. Seeing him he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, saying, "My daughter is at the point of death. Please, come lay your hands on her that she may get well and live." He went off with him, and a large crowd followed him and pressed upon him. There was a woman afflicted with hemorrhages for twelve years. She had suffered greatly at the hands of many doctors and had spent all that she had. Yet she was not helped but only grew worse. She had heard about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak. She said, "If I but touch his clothes, I shall be cured." Immediately her flow of blood dried up. She felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction. Jesus, aware at once that power had gone out from him, turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who has touched my clothes?" But his disciples said to Jesus, "You see how the crowd is pressing upon you, and yet you ask, 'Who touched me?'" And he looked around to see who had done it. The woman, realizing what had happened to her, approached in fear and trembling. She fell down before Jesus and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction." While he was still speaking, people from the synagogue official's house arrived and said, "Your daughter has died; why trouble the teacher any longer?" Disregarding the message that was reported, Jesus said to the synagogue official, "Do not be afraid; just have faith." He did not allow anyone to accompany him inside except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they arrived at the house of the synagogue official, he caught sight of a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. So he went in and said to them, "Why this commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but asleep." And they ridiculed him. Then he put them all out. He took along the child's father and mother and those who were with him and entered the room where the child was. He took the child by the hand and said to her, "*Talitha kum,*" which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise!" The girl, a child of twelve, arose immediately and walked around. At that they were utterly astounded. He gave strict orders that no one should know this and said that she should be given something to eat.

HOMILY: You've heard a lot from me over the last two weeks about the concept of the "Gathered in Your Name" project. I've decided to invite a guest speaker for the final comments, one of the most beloved American poets, the so-called "the Belle of Amherst," Emily Dickinson. She will speak to us through her great poem, "'Hope' is the thing with feathers." [You can find copies of it in the pews—this will go better if you pick one up and follow along!] It gets to the heart of what is this elusive thing we call hope. Let's spend some time with "the Belle of Amherst" and let her instruct us about hope:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops – at all –

And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –
And sore must be the storm –
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm –

I've heard it in the chillest land –
And on the strangest Sea –
Yet – never – in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

The poem begins with an extraordinarily rich image, which it explores for the remaining 11 lines: "Hope" is the thing with feathers— How clever! First note her quotation marks: these suggest something that is intangible and has rich meaning that must not be assumed as simple. We'll spend the rest of the poem exploring this thing. Next, we have a most clever use of the definite article "the." Notice, Dickinson does not choose to say, "Hope is A thing with feathers." Instead, she says, THE thing. The suggestion is that it is the primary or only thing with feathers. Since there are indeed other things with feathers (mostly birds!), she must mean something else with the word "feathers." What is a feather? It is an extraordinary creation of God, a long, thin spine

(called a “rachis”) with hundreds of hair-like “barbules” that fan the air and lift the bird into the air. For Dickinson, then, hope is not a bird, it’s the thing with feathers, that is, that lifts us and helps us soar. Where do we find this “thing”? Dickinson goes on to say that it “perches” in the soul. When a bird perches, it’s ready to soar at any moment, any unpredictable moment. So too is Hope ready to take flight at any moment. And what does this thing do as it perches in the soul? It sings a tune without words! Words represent rational meaning. When we teach children words, we are helping them put some order and reason in the world. The poet is saying that Hope sings, suggesting joy, but it does it in a most unpredictable, most disorderly way! And when does this Hope cease? It “never stops—at all— Here we have an example of the clever punctuation of Dickinson, with her use of two dashes, which lengthen the thought and prompt to take a moment and reflect. Hope never stops. . . pause and think about that . . . at all . . . pause and think about that! The message: Hope in the human soul is deep and never ends!

STANZA 2 reflects about when we experience hope and when it is the sweetest. It is in the midst of the Gale, a storm, a storm that must be “sore,” that is like an agitated being, that does abash (but not destroy!) this hope-bird, but keeps us not cold in the rain, but instead comfortably warm. Hope is most radiant in the midst of the storms of life. In STANZA 3, for the first time we hear a mention of the figure of the poet, who recounts like a travelogue, the travels of the course of her life, where, in each place, she has heard hope flutter down and speak to her. And then she concludes her reflection on “the thing with feathers” by considering how it is produced in her soul. She notes that never, even “in Extremity” did it, that is, “Hope,” ask even a crumb of her. In other words, Hope came with no effort on her part, flew in and fluttered down despite her feelings of chill and strangeness, and lifted her. [Read poem again.]

HOPE is the thing with feathers—it is the thing, alone, that will lift us and let us soar, no matter appearances to the contrary. And while the poet knows not where it comes, in faith we can turn to today’s gospel and see its source. For in the gospel, we see two most hopeless persons: The Synagogue Official Jairus, and the Woman with Hemorrhages. Jairus, we are told, first trusts Jesus to heal his daughter, but hope departs when he receives the report that his daughter has died. The Woman with Hemorrhages is equally hopeless. She doesn’t just have one hemorrhage, she has multiple ones. And she has had them, we are told, for 12 years of fruitless doctoring. And to each of these, the Word of God comes and speaks a word of hope. To the Woman, Jesus says, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction.” While to Jairus, he says, “Do not be afraid. Just have faith” and then to his daughter, “Little girl, I say to you, arise!” Jesus is HOPE, that “thing with feathers” that lifts and raises these hopeless situations and helps them soar into life.

We who are followers of Jesus simply may not look to the future with anything but HOPE. And the poet reminds us of important truths about hope—that it never stops and that it does not need even a crumb from us, except the crumb of faith. It is a relentless and pure gift, ready to lift us, if only we in faith will receive it. You might say, “but there are sufferings, setbacks, illness, and yes, even death.” Those are true, but they are not the final story and, even in this life, Jesus, our single HOPE is ready to be “the thing with feathers” to lift us.

Our parish is on the threshold of something new. You might think I’m referring to the “Gathered in Your Name” project. That is true, but I refer to something more basic. For in Christ, things are always and perpetually being made new (*cf.* Rev. 21:56). And in the face of each new moment granted by our God, may He fill us with that which we cannot achieve on our own: HOPE. We can’t know the future, we can’t know what will be required of us years or even weeks from now. But this is not our concern, for we remain firm in hope—not anxious of the new but instead joyful at the prospects of how God will make, with our cooperation, “all things new.” Let’s go forward in this hope and be for others hope, “the thing with feathers,” each of us one of those tiny yet essential “barbules” on the feather which, moving together with others, lifting our community and all into a “song without words,” a new experience of hope as we work to build the kingdom for generations to come. In all things, we look forward to a future full of hope, because this time and every time is the time for Christ to make all things new. In all we do, let Hope be the final word, “to be an evangelizing community *by faith, with love, in hope.*”