

Proper 8B
The Rev. Emily B. Richards
June 28, 2009

To Overwhelm with Gentleness

Maya will always remain one of my favorite St. Stephen's parishioners. She's a young woman with special needs who became my friend almost immediately upon my arrival at the parish. Sunday mornings were never complete without receiving a Maya hug after the 10 o'clock service. We spent many coffee hour conversations talking about her great passion in life: horseback riding. Since I am from the horse capitol of the world she knew I could appreciate her love of horses. One day I am going to make good on my promise to Maya and get her to the Kentucky Derby.

Because of Maya's own particular set of challenges, she had a difficult time being in new situations. She would get frightened easily by being in unfamiliar settings and among unfamiliar people. She would also get nervous when she had to do anything she considered was "out in front of other people." So, even the walk to the altar rail was an un-comfortable experience for her. In fact, Maya would seldom go up to the rail with her parents. Usually she would only make the journey with one particular woman who

sat with her in the pews. I'll never forget the day when I looked up from the rail and saw Maya holding Maggie's hand, together climbing the chancel steps. She had allowed Maggie into her sacred circle. However, the memory of Maya I will cherish forever is of her confirmation. In the Diocese of Connecticut confirmation services are held as deanery events hosted by an individual parish with hundreds of young people and adults being confirmed and received by the Bishop from many congregations. All of us involved with confirmation prep at St. Stephen's knew this experience would be especially challenging for Maya. She had attended all the classes and the retreat with her friends. She was determined not to miss out because of her fears. During the service as Maya slowly made her way up to the Bishop we were all holding our breaths. When she arrived at his chair, she froze, unable to kneel before him. Her face turned bright red and you could see this look of terror come over her.

Then, a miraculous thing occurred. Seemingly with no concern at all for the eighty or so confirmands who were waiting in line behind her, Bishop Smith took Maya's hand in his and began quietly talking to her. It was as if time stood still and there was no one else in that church except Maya and Bishop Smith. Slowly Maya's anxiety melted away and while still standing the Bishop placed his hands gently on her head and prayed over her. I and all

those gathered in that church had witnessed a sacramental moment of God's grace like no other.

We encounter a similar experience in our Gospel story this morning. After escaping the fierce storm on the boat, Jesus and his disciples return to dry land and to familiar territory. A leader of the synagogue, Jairus, approaches Jesus and begs him to heal his dying daughter. As Jesus begins to make his way to Jairus' home, a large crowd presses in on him. There, in the midst of the crowd is an unnamed woman who had been suffering for twelve, long years with hemorrhages -her life being slowly drained out of her. Unlike Jairus, the well-respected leader of the community, this unnamed woman is an invisible member of society. Refusing to be invisible and powerless any longer, she dares to reach out and touch this healer's cloak, hoping that just maybe she will finally be freed from her suffering.

Not being swayed by the crowd or his disciples' Jesus stops what's he's doing to be present to this woman. The most important thing for him in this moment is to acknowledge the woman as a living, breathing human being and not just as an anonymous touch. In so doing he is saying to her, "Daughter, you are invisible no more." One writer commented on this story by saying, Jesus "overwhelmed her with gentleness." Throughout his entire

ministry, Jesus gave himself fully to each and every relationship, to each and every encounter with another human being along the journey. Jesus stopped to notice, to listen and to include. In his gentle and compassionate presence, one was not only restored to physical wholeness, but one's dignity was restored, as well as one's rightful place as a member of God's family.

All of us who were at Maya's confirmation service were witnesses to that same overwhelming gentleness. In Bishop Smith's willingness to pause just for a moment, to be fully present to this child of God standing before him, God's grace was showered not only upon Maya, but upon all of us worshiping in that church. As followers of Jesus, we are called to overwhelm others with our gentleness by giving ourselves fully to each and every encounter with the other in our midst, whether the other is a member of our own household or even a complete stranger. God desires for us to be active participants in God's holy work of healing and restoration-to hold out before others the promise that in God's Kingdom no one is invisible, no one is without dignity, and no one is excluded.

In our world today we lead such busy lives and have so many demands placed upon us, so many things, important things, which compete for our time and our attention. We go about our day with our own obligations and agendas

and we don't like to have them disrupted. And so it is easy to overlook those precious opportunities in which to pause for a moment and see the one standing before us who desperately needs our acknowledgment and our compassion. What we learn from Jesus, our teacher, is that it is exactly in the midst of these unexpected disruptions in our daily lives that we find ourselves blessed beyond measure by God's grace.

May we never be too busy to give of ourselves to one another. May we never be so pushed and pulled by the obligations and agendas set before us that we ignore the person standing before us who needs to be reminded of God's love for them. And may we live our lives in such a way that each day is filled with new opportunities to participate in God's work of healing grace in our world. *Amen.*