

When we read these two intertwined stories in Mark's gospel, it's easy to get pulled into the drama of each one. You can picture each scene with stark clarity. Jesus stops in the middle of a crowded dusty street, looks around, and asks the astonishing question, "Who touched me?" The apostles, wondering if he's losing it, respond, "Who *isn't* touching you?" Then the trembling woman steps forward, admits it was she, and tells her story of suffering and ritual uncleanness, a story of 12 years of virtual banishment. Her story has turned into one of health and restoration because of a single act of faith. Jesus praises her with a smile from ear to ear.

The second scene is just as dramatic. Jesus arrives at a house in a village, surrounded by wailing relatives and friends, and announces that a dead girl is just sleeping. Once again, there is astonishment at his words, once again a reference to faith. Jesus, utterly confident, shoos away the townspeople, enters the home with Mom and Dad, and quietly asks the girl to rise from the bed. No mumbo-jumbo magic words, no dramatic gestures, just a simple command. And life is restored. The girl is 12 years old; the woman suffered 12 years – the number 12 being one of those important biblical numbers we're meant to notice. God is at work.

It's easy to stop here and take these two stories at face value. But let's go a bit deeper, shall we? Understand that both the woman and the girl eventually die – hopefully after long and fruitful lives – but note that Jesus did not make them immortal. They still die. One could ask, somewhat cynically, why bother healing them? Why bother healing anyone for that matter? Jesus' healing is a temporary fix at best. Why did he do this? What is being conveyed to us here? The answer is in our first reading from the book of Wisdom. Did you hear it? Listen again: *God did not make death, nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living.* And further on: *For God formed man to be imperishable; the image of his own nature...* Remember that Jesus is the human face of the living God. He needs to demonstrate with clarity and conviction that these passages from Wisdom are completely true. Jesus displays an almost cavalier attitude toward death. He does not fear death, nor does he even respect it. Death, it seems to Jesus, is a *minor inconvenience* in the path of life, no more unusual or frightening than a bad cold. And yet, to us humans, it is the most terrifying aspect of our existence. We'll do anything we can to avoid it, seek any miracle we can to postpone it.

I just returned from a couple of weeks of vacation, journeying through the northern part of Italy. As you would expect, every city and town has at least

one old stone church, and some villages, like the town of Lucca, have over a hundred. But what really makes an Italian town stand out from the others is the presence of a major basilica that houses a holy relic. This is the case of one place we visited, the town of Padua, famous for the tomb and relics of its favorite son, St. Anthony.

So, let's pause a moment. What is a relic? A relic is a physical object linked directly to a person who is held in reverence by the Catholic church, such as an apostle, a saint, or Jesus Christ himself. One of the first seekers of relics was the empress Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, who traveled to the Holy Land in 327 AD to seek the remains of the cross on which Jesus was crucified. Many of the apostles have each had their bones claimed by various communities around the Mediterranean, putting towns like Venice on the map. When Catherine of Siena died in 1380, who like Mother Teresa was already considered a saint in her lifetime, Rome demanded that her body be sent to Rome for proper burial and honor. The town of Siena complied to the letter, sending Catherine's body to Rome as instructed, but not before keeping the head for themselves.

We can chuckle at these excesses, and question the authenticity of such relics in many cases, but what we can't do is dismiss them out of hand. God created all things, and through his ongoing love, maintains all in existence. At various times and in various places, God imbues his grace in a particularly focused way on a very ordinary part of his universe, making that object or person a unique channel of God's goodness. A perfect example is today's gospel of the hemorrhaging woman, who is healed by touching the cloak of Jesus. Did the cloak heal her? Of course not! The power of God did. The cloak, in theological terms, was the "occasion" of the miracle.

A saint, by definition and Church affirmation, is a person who lived a life as an instrument of God. God's grace flowed through that person with such intensity that miracles often occurred in and around that person while they lived. To the surprise and delight of good Christians over the ages, miracles often continued to occur even after the death of the Saint, simply by being in the presence of that Saint's remains. God's grace, it appears, has amazing holding power. It's no wonder that people would come from miles around to access this grace by praying before the remains, the relics of the saint.

I have with me today a so-called tertiary relic from St. Anthony of Padua. It's sealed in this card, with the following inscription: *This relic is a small*

*piece of linen, reverently brought into contact with the blessed tongue of St. Anthony, which has remained uncorrupted for more than 700 years.* And yes indeed, you can enter St. Anthony's basilica in Padua and see that exact, incorruptible tongue sealed behind glass today. So, is there some kind of magic in this little card? What does the Church actually teach about these things?

The Church is very clear. There's no magical power in any relic, whether it's the bones of St. Peter or a sliver of the true cross or the head of St. Catherine. There is ample evidence, however, that cures of a miraculous nature have indeed occurred in the presence of such relics. One can understand the temptation, the desire, the faith of pilgrims to journey to such sites and be in the presence of the occasion of miracles. In this, they are no different from the hemorrhaging woman. But I wonder, in our zeal, if we forget that we have access to the focused power of God's grace available to us every day, not through the relic of a saint, but through the very person of Jesus Christ himself. Yes, it's called the Eucharist, and notice how God takes two very unmagical, ordinary things of this earth, bread and wine, and confects the very body, soul, and divinity of Christ for us to not simply adore, but to consume. No need to travel anywhere, folks – it's right here – and who's to say that miracles cannot continue to occur?

The key to all of this is faith. Faith is a profoundly experienced admixture of hope and desire, a sure knowledge and acceptance of God's presence in our lives. The hemorrhaging woman had it, the parents of the 12-year old girl had it. You have it. Yes, you do. You wouldn't be here otherwise. It's a gift from God and with *faith*, illness and death are nothing more than stumbles on your journey to the company of saints who precede you. Remember Jesus' words today: "Do not be afraid; just have faith."