Who calls for Jesus?

Galatians 1:1-12

Luke 7:1-10

Before I die I want to write a novel and eat an entire pound of candy in one sitting.

I’m scared I’ll die alone.

I sold heroin to a friend and it ruined his life.

Who would reveal these sorts of thoughts? Many more people than you might think, thanks to public art projects. A number of public art exhibits exist throughout the world, but some of the most famous are those conceived by Candy Chang. The convictions I cited come from her two recent displays: “Before I die,” which is a chalkboard wall in New Orleans and “Confessions,” which is a room filled with confessions in the Las Vegas strip.[[1]](#footnote-0) These pieces drew from anyone and everyone. If you wanted to write your bucket list on the chalkboard wall, or scribble a confession on a post-it, you could. The power of these exhibits comes from seeing all of our “private” matter in a public setting. We are much more alike than we think.

Besides these exhibits making a thoughtful statement to their viewers, the participants experienced a sort of catharsis and absolution. They let out their fears and longings and regrets, trusting them to be absorbed--and in a sense, affirmed or released--by the public. Although these were secular endeavors, we might say that the community appropriated the role of God here. Healing and recognition came by way of the dignity and respect given to the participants’ vulnerabilities, even if anonymously and from a distance.

In the church year, we are entering the long, long season of Ordinary Time, not defined by extraordinary events of God’s life but by familiar miracles and messages that touch our lives. We become farther removed from the excitement of Jesus’ birth, earthly trials and tribulations, death, and resurrection, and begin tracking the less thrill-laden events: healings, teachings, unlikely gatherings--all revolutionary in their own way, but in creeps an undeniable distance from the mystery that defines our faith.

Such is the situation that Paul addresses in Galatia. While we see from his letter that he feels fully in touch with God because of his conversion experience, the community in Galatia is uncertain of their way forward. They do not have Jesus with them but teachers and missionaries who speak in Jesus’ name, all of whom present the gospel differently. Paul introduced Christ’s message one way, and when he left the Galatians for his next mission, others told the Galatians that they must become Jews before becoming Christians. The fervor and frustration in Paul’s letter makes clear that he believes this community has lost its way, that they have muddied the message of the gospel.

That diversity and reckoning with difference we saw a couple weeks ago on Pentecost? Here we find similar struggles but not yet harmony. What does it mean to follow Jesus? Who can claim to speak in God’s name, and on what authority? What proves essential to faith--and what is superfluous? Our New Testament poses and engages these questions, and we still wrestle with them today.

Our other text for this morning also riffs on the theme of distance from Jesus, although this distance is not temporal but spatial. First and foremost, this story strikes us because it disrupts so many boundaries: Jesus heals not one of his own, a Jew, but a Gentile, and not simply a Gentile, but a slave--talk about an upsetting of typical first century Roman social arrangements! The centurion feels persuaded to reach out to Jesus in the first place, which is peculiar that a Roman soldier would place that much trust and confidence in a lowly Jewish tradesman. And not only are those who see Jesus’ work amazed, but Jesus himself is humbled by the centurion’s display of faith in coming to him. Let’s just say the details of this story are not exactly commonplace or predictable.

Besides challenging notions of who constitutes the faithful, this healing makes the point that Jesus reaches us not always directly but through others, throught the ordinary hands which clasp together in prayer, through the lips which speak of hardship and ask for help, through the eyes which recognize need. Instead of healing through touch, which is the case in most of the miracles, Jesus responds to a spoken request.

This passage is not without its troubles, to be sure. We know nothing of the slave’s perspective--whether he (or she) found the centurion’s request generous and caring or self-serving and paternalistic--because the slave, in this telling, does not have agency. But that the healing happens through the centurion who reaches out to two Jewish elders who contact Jesus who then cures the slave shows a gigantic complex of relationships. It demonstrates civility and cooperation and trust between those with different belief systems and allegiances, an accountability on all sides to the taking care of one another.

I bet many of us are thinking about the frought environment of our country right now in the wake of this election year, and these readings certainly have something to teach us. Difference and disagreement is inevitable because we all are somewhat removed from God by virtue of not being God. One of the best ways we can find God, however, is by working together for the sakes of one another.

St. Mary’s has been doing this. The discernment process has been winding down, and we are entering our own season of ordinary time in the life of this parish, but by engaging in such deep listening, we all have been searching for God in one another. As we move forward in imagining the future of this church, Jesus, we pray, will show up in the relationships we forge over the little stuff (that is actually big stuff) like Morning Prayer or Eucharist on Sundays and over the mind-bogglingly complex matters like how we grow and distribute food so all have enough to eat.

When we need Jesus, sometimes we ask, and he comes. But our communities and the church sometimes beat us to the punch, or ask when we cannot ask, in those moments--or seasons--when we do not have faith and have fallen into despair. Together, with God’s help, we can lift each other up, whether in healings made possible by unlikely partnerships, chalkboard walls which bring us to tears, or in church services like this one, where we know our neighbors and the many who came before us enable us to say to God, in the words of acclaimed writer Anne Lamott: help, thanks, wow.[[2]](#footnote-1)

1. See more about Candy Chang’s projects at http://candychang.com/work. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. See Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)