13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

When the scriptures are read here each Sunday, they are heard in almost as many different ways as we have people in the congregation. Some hear just the encouragement they need, or a perfect word of comfort. Others need to be challenged, and hear the challenge of the Gospel applying to their life. But the toughest challenge can come when the scriptures raise a painful question, and don’t seem to provide an answer. I believe this Gospel can raise a very tough question, especially for a person at the third threshold of becoming a disciple.

I’ll get to the question, but first, you may be thinking: What? I’ve never heard of thresholds of becoming a disciple. Yes, there are various thresholds, and understanding some of them can help illustrate why this Gospel can be troubling, while also pointing a way through the challenges.

The first threshold of becoming a disciple is trust. I’m not talking about trusting Jesus … that comes later. The first step in the journey for children, baptized as infants, can be trusting their parents. From there, they can later move on to trusting Jesus. For those whose journey begins in adulthood, the opening to trust can be through trusting a friend or acquaintance who is a believer. The trust might be in a group of friends, a particular parish the person has visited, or for that matter trust in Pope Francis. At any rate, to become a disciple, first there needs to be some human connection of trust. “If this person thinks that much of Jesus, I ought to check it out.”

That is the second threshold, curiosity. For the young child, watching Mom and Dad pray, or going to church with them, creates a certain curiosity. In adulthood, it can be “WOW, what is it that makes my friend seem so much more peaceful and together than lots of other folks I know? Who is this person, Jesus, who seems to make such a difference in my friend’s life?” Curiosity can come while attending Mass. One can think: “I watch folks go up for communion, and something happens. I’d love to understand that more.” Spiritual curiosity.

Now curiosity just means I wouldn’t mind knowing more. Everyone in the crowd in our Gospel today had curiosity. “Who is this guy Jesus? I hear he has done some amazing things. I wonder what he’ll do today? Hey, Jairus asked for him to come heal his daughter, and it looks like he is headed to their house. Let’s go, and see how it turns out.” That’s curiosity.

Curiosity can lead to openness, although openness can be the most challenging threshold to cross. Openness, the third threshold, is being willing to consider change. This new information, gathered through curiosity: who Jesus is, what he offers, what following him might look like means I might need to change, and I am open to the possibility that I may need to redirect my life.

I see openness in Jairus, and in the woman with the hemorrhage. For them, it wasn’t just a matter of curiosity. Jairus was aware that many of his fellow synagogue leaders had a pretty dim view of Jesus, seeing him as a troublemaker, stirring up the status quo. Jairus was ready to reach out to Jesus, knowing that in doing so, he was pretty close to take a stand: I need to see if
Jesus is the answer, even if it does stir things up in my life. The woman in the middle of this Gospel was not only open to how Jesus might change her life, she was desperate for change. Her affliction made her unclean. Just pushing through the crowd to get to Jesus was a big risk. If folks realized she had touched them, making them unclean, they could get really angry. She wasn’t just curious, she was bold, willing to take that risk, open to where ever pushing to touch Jesus might lead.

So why might this Gospel be difficult for a person who was at that third threshold of becoming a disciple, openness? It could turn out this way. “Hey, I trusted. That led me to be curious about this person, Jesus. I even learned enough to be open to change. I became a person who prays. After all, someone I love was very ill.” Or, “I have cancer, and the treatment doesn’t seem to be working.” Here is the rub. “How come the woman was healed, Jairus’s daughter was brought back to life, but my praying, my reaching out to Jesus hasn’t seemed to make a difference??? Don’t I have enough faith? Doesn’t Jesus heal anymore? Where is my miracle?”

I believe these are questions every real disciple has to work through at some time in their life. It is the path into the paschal mystery. Without have moved on to seriously seeking a relationship with Jesus, and then choosing to make a lifelong commitment, not getting the miracle we ask can throw someone into a truly dark place. Being open, and being open to the paschal mystery are two different things!

There is no simple answer, but understanding what Mark was up to, putting these stories together can help. Mark was not intending to just write a history book about Jesus. He was writing to draw people into a life-long relationship with Jesus. He was writing to encourage his community, even those who had the tough questions. The community was being persecuted. Fellow believers were suffering or being killed. Of course they had tough questions! He wanted folks to stay with this particular section of his Gospel long enough to discover that while miracles can and do happen, Jesus’ purpose in his ministry was not just to go around doing amazing things, giving everyone exactly what they asked for. He had to lead them to understand the real goal is eternal life. A life that conquers death. A life beyond the grasp of death and annihilation.

Mark uses the idea of misunderstanding, as one clue that this is ultimately about resurrection. The crowd ridiculed Jesus for saying the child was asleep, and he would wake her. He knew though, and we know, that in fact he would wake her from the sleep of death. This isn’t the only time for this misunderstanding; it is in John’s Gospel too, with Lazarus. Jesus said “Lazarus is asleep, I am going to wake him.” But he really meant wake from the sleep of death. Lazarus would die again. So would the little girl. But after the resurrection. The message hinted at would be revealed. With Jesus, death is not the end. He took away the sting of death.

More clues in this passage to tell us that the central point goes beyond Jairus and the woman with the hemorrhage having their prayers answered: the word ‘arise’ as in “Little girl, I say to you, arise!” is the same word used in the Gospels for Jesus rising from the dead.

Why include the detail about Jesus saying “give her something to eat”? It echoes Jesus’ resurrection appearances, when Jesus ate with the disciples, or asked for a piece of fish. Eating in
front of witnesses was proof he had passed through death but now was truly alive, not just a ghost. Our Gospel today is pointing to Jesus’ resurrection: Jesus has the power to give life.

At the third threshold of becoming a disciple, we can be really focused on immediate needs and issues, not looking very far into the future. How can Jesus take away this sorrow that is weighing in my heart right now? Will he heal this illness? Can he make things like they were before, right this minute? On the threshold of openness, we are often focused on our will, the present moment, and not God’s will, or the journey to a life beyond this one.

With time, and crossing two more thresholds, we discover God’s will is never for our harm, but always that we might have life, and life in the full. God’s word expressed that clearly in our first reading. The journey to that life beyond the power of death and suffering, truly being a disciple and following Jesus, entails embracing the paschal mystery. Jesus took hold of death, and wrestled away its power to destroy. He turned death into an open door, not a locked one. But the path we all must take is through the paschal mystery. Thresholds of becoming a disciple lead us to becoming a new creation, until Jesus takes us by the hand and leads us through the final threshold, death, to the light, the beatific vision, to eternal life with God.

Once we have been in a relationship with Jesus for some time, and our trust has shifted from trust in a human to deep, grace filled trust in God, trust in Jesus who has power over death, trusting that even in illness or grief, he is with us, bringing us life, offering us peace; once we are there, then what we desire, what we pray for, what we know we need changes.

There may be a storm, but rather than praying “make this storm stop now”, we pray “Lord, be with me and help me weather the storm.” While we may pray for physical healing, our deepest prayer is to be tuned into God’s will, and spiritual healing. Like everyone, one day we will die, but not alone. We don’t pray to live forever, we pray to die in peace, and into God’s everlasting arms. As disciples we come to trust that the end won’t be an end, it will be the fulfillment of a relationship that has carried us through ups and downs, through all the storms, to the peaceful shore.

Miracles do happen. But then often the miracle we ask for doesn’t. In either case, the experience can lead us closer to Christ. A miracle can take us to a new threshold. But an unanswered prayer can lead us through one as well, often to the threshold of true discipleship, where we cling to Jesus as the giver of life, not simply looking to him to do what we ask.

Miracles we don’t get immerse us in the paschal mystery, the mystery we celebrate every time we gather at the altar.

“Father, if it is possible take this cup from me.” The father had a greater plan for Jesus: conquering death and rising from the dead. That is where God will lead us as well, with miracles, and without them.

Lord, lead us through our questions to a deep, abiding relationship with you, where our questions dissolve in your eternal love.