

## The Resurrected Service

Last Thursday, I stumbled into the healing service for those living with AIDS. I'd entered the sanctuary through a side door that tumbled me right into a group already gathered on the pews. I was brought up short, because I'd thought the service would be in the chapel, and everyone seated seemed to know what they were doing. Unsure of myself, I leaned into the man seated on the pew and asked, "Is this the healing service?" He answered quietly, "Yes, Ma'am."

The man was African American, as were the others formed on the pews. Our church is mostly white, although the woman who came and sat beside me, Mrs. Thomas, is African American and a parishioner. The rest of the group was kind of rag-tag, and they acted like a group on an outing, with a white man in charge. My brain put this information together and concluded they were from Friends for Life, a service organization for those living with AIDS. Many years ago, before my church had begun to die, we'd offered a healing service specifically for Friends for Life. It looked as if we'd resurrected it.

The service was being held in front of our newly installed altar. The altar was used during the 1878 yellow fever plague in Memphis when everyone who was able to leave

town did; of those remaining, over 5,000 died; and the city legally expired, losing its charter for the next fourteen years. Even though our church is dedicated to the Martyrs of Memphis who tended to the yellow fever sick, the altar had been shoved aside for a while, but now it is back in use.

The Deacon explained everything about the service, in the assumption that most people weren't Episcopalians, and the service can be odd if you aren't used to it. She was nervous. Not usually in charge, she'd stepped in when the Dean was called away for a funeral. She did a good job, particularly when it was time to give the homily and she described three instances of healing she'd been involved with. The last example was of a man in a hospital bed who'd burped and released the gas that he thought was a killing heart attack. It made everyone laugh. Then we all held hands, and she said a prayer of healing.

I was disappointed. Usually for the healing, you approach the altar, and kneel. The priest makes the sign of the cross on your forehead in oil and then lays hands on you in prayer. This is how I was healed. My first husband gave me herpes and, knowing that healing was one of our seven sacraments, I went to the healing service believing it was a holy, powerful thing. The priest laid hands on me,

I fell out at the altar, and I haven't had a herpes episode since. That was in 1983. Now the doctors who assured me there was no possibility of a misdiagnosis assure me I was misdiagnosed.

I don't know if the Friends for Life knew how it could've been done, so had no disappointment. Also, there was something very powerful in our holding hands and praying each other into health. But I thought some could've used the personal prayer, the weight of hands on bended backs. The human touch boosts the immune system. The greatest danger to those living with an HIV infection is a depressed immune system. But people fear them and shy away. The attention would've been good for them, and for the parishioner with the broken leg seated on the pew in front of me. But the Deacon said we were too many and time constraints had us do it the other way. I hoped it helped.

I'd come to pray for our nation's prison system. I'd been praying for its healing for eight months on my own, praying that the Lord would replace a system based on violence, hierarchy, and domination with one suffused with love. Or maybe I was going to pray for my migraines, I hadn't decided. Didn't matter. As I held the hands of Mrs. Thomas and the man next to me, I lifted up both my prayers, along with the healing of everyone in the sanctuary.

Twice during the service, folks sang. The singers were beautiful, their voices bouncing off the walls of the great sanctuary, their human love amplified by the cathedral of God's love. After the service, when I ran to the parking lot to tell the singers how much I'd enjoyed the singing, one of the guys beamed, talking about the joy of hearing his voice in that wonderful space. It made me wish we could open the sanctuary to "non-professional" singers who just wanted to sing God's love. Maybe we will one day.

At one time, I would not have believed such a thing possible for my church. But my church is returning to life. We have a new Dean—the one who traveled six hours to attend a funeral because the man who'd died was the father of a friend—who is leading us back into the living God. And, so important, we are following. We have a new outreach committee, now called the Servant Ministry Team. We do art projects in the Parish Hall, we rally the youth and take them to More-than-a-Meal where they serve the homeless, sit down at the communal table, visit. We have new signs directing people to where they might want to go, trusting that we will have folks who need to be directed. On Sunday mornings, the Holy Spirit fills our hearts; sometimes we clap in spontaneous enthusiasm. And we have the healing service.

When we rose to leave the service, the parishioner with the broken leg said, "Well, I'm glad I came today. That was a gift."

I had wondered what he would think, because he is a sophisticated, urbane man. And he'd come with his own healing needs. But I underestimated him. Like all of us, he'd come to church to be with God. The restored altar, the resurrected service, the Dean's faith in our possibilities, the arrival of the guests from Friends for Life, the Deacon's courage to lead, the offered songs, the hands held in prayer—it gave us what we wanted: last Thursday, in St. Mary's Cathedral in Memphis, Tennessee, we were with God.