

WGUMC September 4, 2011 “You Have Options”
Matthew 17:14-20

In the late 70’s and early 80’s, I was a teenager in my home church in Billings, Montana. During that time, the charismatic renewal movement was seeping into mainline congregations. The youth group I occasionally attended was led by a couple who were very much in the charismatic camp. I remember how they encouraged us to pray for the gift of speaking in tongues. Now, a part of the charismatic movement was the practice of faith healing. The message I got as a teen was: “If you have enough faith, you will be healed.”

That’s what our text in Matthew implies today. A man comes begging for mercy for his son. His son suffers terribly. He falls into the fire, falls into the water. He is an epileptic, according to the NRSV, a lunatic according to the King James, literally “moonstruck” in the original Greek.

In the world of the Bible, such maladies were as mysterious as the moon. Since there seemed to be no natural,

physical cause for the falling, there must be a supernatural one. Whatever was wrong with the child, it must have been the work of a demon. That was the thinking. Exorcism, then, was the only way to bring about healing.

The disciples try, but they fail to cast the demon out. Then Jesus steps in. He rebukes the disciples and the demon and cures the little boy. When his disciples ask him, “How did you do that? Why couldn’t we do it?” Jesus answers, “Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.” [Matthew 17:20]

One of the girls in my youth group had epilepsy. When she read this passage, she was convinced that her seizure medication was not the answer. It makes you tired, sometimes dizzy; it makes you gain weight; it rots your teeth. She decided that prayer and fasting could cure her, if only she had enough

faith. So, she quit taking her meds. She prayed. She fasted. Others prayed for her, laid hands on her. For a couple of weeks she was OK. Then she had a bad seizure. She was devastated. She figured she hadn't prayed hard enough, fasted long enough. She hadn't had enough faith. Her seizure was all her fault.

I remember thinking that she was foolish to quit taking her meds and then blame herself for her lack of faith. I remember thinking, "My God doesn't work that way, curing some and leaving others to suffer."

It never made sense to me. I suppose that's why I never prayed for a cure for my epilepsy. In many ways, I was lucky. When I was 18 months old, I contracted spinal meningitis. I was in a coma for three days at the Des Moines Children's Hospital. They nearly lost me. Massive doses of sulfa and penicillin saved me. Other than having to learn to walk and talk again, I was seemingly fine.

Until puberty. About the age of 12, I started having strange *de ja vu* experiences, started having anxious, butterfly feelings in my stomach. The doctor told my mother: it's a pre-migraine condition. It continued for several years. I never had a migraine. Then one day, my older sister was home from college. She spoke to me, and I didn't answer her. I was "out of it" for almost a minute. I didn't know it then, but I was having a complex partial seizure. I never lost consciousness. I just went into an altered state of consciousness, without drugs!

My junior year in high school I was diagnosed with temporal lobe epilepsy and began a very long odyssey of doctor visits, blood draws, EEG's, CAT Scans, MRI's, and a whole litany of mood-altering, sleep-inducing, nauseating drugs, none of which did what they were supposed to do.

Somehow I made it through. I kept riding my horses. I graduated Salutatorian in a class of 640. I got a full-ride to Boston University. By the time I was in college, the seizures

were getting worse, and I was getting more and more depressed. Yet never once did I allow myself to pray for the seizures to go away. Oh, I did pray. I prayed for strength, for courage, for joy, for hope.

Long story. I got my call to ministry. I went to seminary. I kept trying different meds. The seizures kept getting more frequent. I was ordained. I was appointed. In the summer of 1989, I found myself a pastor in Filer, Idaho, a town of about 1700 people nestled along the Snake River, six miles west of Twin Falls on old Highway 30. I was 24 years old, living alone in the parsonage, with uncontrolled complex partial seizures and no car.

My very first official act as a minister was a wedding on the Saturday before my first Sunday, and I had a seizure in the middle of the ceremony. I had taken the maid of honor aside during the rehearsal and told her what she didn't need to do for me if that were to happen. It turns out that she was a nurse

and she already knew. At the outdoor barbecue reception at the family dairy farm, the bride's parents toasted me. And the beauty of grace dawned on me.

There were other seizures in the pulpit. "Sing a hymn until she's back." Sometimes I'd walk out of the sanctuary, get a drink and walk back, not knowing what I was doing, until I could pick up where I left off in the sermon.

About a year into my first job, I learned from the Epilepsy League that there were no seizure specialists in the entire state of Idaho. In the years before the internet, that was a very lonely place to be. So, my dad found a doctor for me at Oregon Health Sciences University in Portland. I enrolled in an experimental implant study and was flown there once a month. The best part is: for the first time in my life I had a neurologist with a personality.

I am a life-time member of the Martin Salinsky fan club, not because he promised me a cure, but because he

encouraged me, even after the experimental implant failed, after the experimental drug failed. His gift was this: At some point during every visit, he found the opportunity to assure me: "Remember, you have options."

The option he had in mind for me was a right temporolobectomy. I didn't want to contemplate brain surgery, but I began to realize that for a long time I'd been in denial about the toll the epilepsy was taking on me. I was pretty high functioning, so this wasn't a life or death situation, except that I was living a kind of death. I was letting myself be defined by my disease. Though I was very frustrated by my life situation, I wasn't so excited about taking the risk to change it. It wasn't the surgery I was afraid of—I would almost certainly survive it. It was the unknown aftermath that scared me.

Two months before the surgery, I was leading a Lenten Bible Study. And I wrote a poem in first person about the healing of the bent-over woman in the Gospel of Luke. The

poem was much more about the pastor than a person in
ancient Palestine:

I wish it were so easy
to release the muscles holding captive my twisted frame;
to relax the nerves that imprison my mind's frame;
to lift my head and see past my toes;
to claim a horizon beyond concrete and dirt.
I wish it were so easy
to cast off the weight of unchosen burdens and stand straight;
to be freed from the faithful pain that cripples backs and
hearts and brains;
to resolutely walk away from the sin that comforts, then kills
us;
to hopefully approach the life that horrifies, then heals us.
I wish it were so easy
to have the courage to be well and to forsake my familiar
sickness;
to be Jesus' uninvited guest in this invitation-only world;
to accept the weathered, gentle hands and praise God with my
own hands;
to give up the dread that doubles me over for a liberty that
lifts me up forever.
Heal me Jesus. Make me stand straight.

After 16 years of seizures, I let this woman in the Bible
pray for my healing. I spent a week in the hospital for tests.
Flew to UCLA for a PET Scan. They wanted to find the scar
tissue from the meningitis that was causing the seizures. On

May 19th, I had the hippocampus, about a ten-centimeter section of my right temporal lobe, removed by a computer-guided ultrasonic knife. The surgery was a cinch, except that I had the mother-of-all headaches for three weeks. But I was back to work part-time in just four weeks and full-time in six. The physical recovery was really nothing doing. The emotional recovery was another matter altogether.

Dr. Salinsky's prophetic pre-surgical words came back to haunt me: "You may have more trouble learning to live without epilepsy than you think." All of a sudden a life that had had too few options was overwhelmed by them. My reliable old excuses for not being all that I wanted to be had suddenly deserted me. Like someone surviving a divorce or the death of a spouse, I grieved for a life that was no longer, no matter how painful it had been. So much of my identity had been wrapped up in sickness that I didn't know who I was now that I was well.

It seemed that I was having to do everything as if for the first time.

In all these years as a Christian, it was the first time that I had to pray just to get through the day. I even took up fasting. But now I was keenly aware that God was with me. What's more, I discovered that God had always been with me. I remember just before the surgery, I had prayed, saying, "God, I need to know that you are real." I held out my hand and said, "I need to know you are tangible enough to feel."

And it wasn't until a few months after the surgery that God responded to me. One morning when I was reading the Bible, praying:

Now that everything is a possible,
tears flow from the prison of the improbable,
and at first I was insensible
to the weight of the hand,
quiet and warm on my shoulder,
making no demand,
but that I look back over
years spent
angry and thirsty,
a stranger to joy, an alien to energy.

And the question keeps coming to me:
How did I withstand
this God-forsaken wasteland?
Then it occurred to me
that I remembered this hand
and faintly its feel,
always real,
sometimes hard,
but never quite so tangible.
Incomprehensible.
For a moment
you broke through and touched me.
Lord, have mercy.

This was really the answer to my prayer: not the surgery,
not being 100% seizure-free. I had prayed that God would be
real for me, and that morning, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

I had no idea then what options God had in store for me.
In that first year of recovery, I got my driver's license and a
church member in Eugene gave me a car, an '81 Chrysler New
Yorker. On the second anniversary of the surgery, I was still
seizure free and finally medication free and head over heels in
love with a Brooklyn-born Jew, practicing as a Roman Catholic,
working as a Native American linguist. By the third year, I was

married, had made the decision to go back to school and was preparing to move to Berkeley. Seven years and two days later, I became a mother. And fifteen years after receiving my Permanent Head Damage (PHD), I was finally awarded a PhD.

But that's not why I'm telling you this story, to brag about what God has done for me. I tell you this story because I want to be real with you about how real God has been for me. And I don't think you have to have had brain surgery to get real with God. I still don't know much about faith that can move mountains, but I do know that God is real and that, no matter what our situation, no matter how unfixable, unchangeable it may seem to be, there are always, always options for all of us.

So, Jolletta Carlson, if you're out there, if you are still having seizures, I pray that you haven't given up hope. I pray that you have found some options for wholeness in your life, that God is real for you in unimaginably wonderful ways. And

the same goes for you. Because “weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” Believe it. So be it.